

Fate Genesis

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While fighting against Dr. Eggman, Sonic and the gang are transported to Fuyuki at the beginning of the 5th Heaven's Feel. A Chaos factor like no other has been introduced to the Holy Grail War, and Masters and Servants alike find their plans blown away by a sonic boom!

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Chapter 1: *Sonic Boom*

Egg Saucer Zone

High in the sky it flew. It maintained its altitude and momentum by spinning, its disc-like shape bringing to mind a pizza made of steel and silicon. An observer looking at it from afar would claim that it was an alien invasion, an observation that was inaccurate.

At least, about it being alien.

It was the *Egg Saucer* , and it was the center of Dr. Ivo 'Eggman' Robotnik's latest and most daring plot for World Domination©. It contained a weapon of unimaginable power- the Genesis Ray. Once fired, the whole planet would fall into his grasp.

Not if Sonic the Hedgehog and his friends had anything to say about it!

Sonic raced through the *Egg Saucer* 's facilities, dodging unfriendly fire and smashing any robot that got too close. He leapt over conveyor belts and past pits with spikes at the bottom. He knew he had to be fast- Sonic was always fast, but this time he had an extra reason to hurry. Eggman had gotten his hands on all seven Chaos Emeralds, and planned on using their energy to fuel his weapons. Sonic had to reach him before they got near something the not-so-good doctor could fire at!

Outside, Miles 'Tails' Prower flew around the *Egg Saucer* 's airspace in his bi-plane, the *Tornado* . After dropping his friends off, he began to buzz the *Egg Saucer* and draw its cannon fire, as well as give back a few salvos of his own. One shot from the *Egg Saucer* grazed the biplane, shaking it up, but Tails kept his cool.

In another part of the Egg Saucer, Knuckles the Echinda was an red engine of destruction, smashing Badniks apart with his spiked fists. While the one-echinda army act battled the robot hordes, Amy Rose ran about, jumping from one egg pod to the next. With adept precision she landed on each of the Pods' yellow buttons, opening them up and releasing the critters trapped inside.

"Go! You're free!" Amy called out to the fleeing animals. "Knuckles, that's the last of them! Let's go!"

Knuckles crushed one last Crabmeat before answering. "We can't leave yet. We have to take care of Eggman!"

"Sonic's on it! He'll scramble the doc's plans!" Amy insisted, her eyes shining as she thought of her precious Sonic.

But Knuckles wasn't so sure of Sonic's success. "But Eggman's got the Emeralds...!"

Dr. Eggman grinned evilly as he watched the fuel gauge for the Genesis Ray rise. He was impressed with how quickly the machine was absorbing the Emeralds' power. At this rate, the Ray would be fully powered before they even reached a city.

Before Eggman could decide whether or not he wanted to attain total control without an audience, the doors to his chamber blew open. The dust cleared, and there stood Sonic, bold as brass and blue as paint. The hedgehog grinned.

"Sonic," Eggman growled, "You're not stopping me this time!"

"I've done it before," Sonic responded cheekily, "Why spoil a tradition?"

Eggman's reply to that was to activate his Eggmobile's weapons. The hovercraft floated into the air, armed with a giant claw on its left side and a cannon on the right.

Sonic began to run all around the chamber, dodging laser blasts and missiles, jumping now and then to avoid the claw whenever Eggman sent it out. When the claw ended up lodged in the wall (The inevitable result of overzealous aim) Sonic took the opportunity to attack the Eggmobile's main body. Curling into a ball and spinning at super-speed, Sonic rammed into the Eggmobile's front- just another showdown between Sonic the Hedgehog and Dr. Eggman.

But then something went wrong.

The force of Sonic's attack jarred Eggman in his cockpit, causing him to hit certain controls. These controls undid the safeguards that prevented Eggman's weapons from attacking crucial equipment, and now there was nothing to stop the missiles from hitting the Genesis Ray's main drive. Poor Eggman didn't realize until after he had tried to blast Sonic, who was just too fast to be targeted.

"Oh no!" Eggman gasped as the machinery began to crackle and pop, emitting sparks of electricity. "No, no, no!"

Sonic gave a mocking salute and took off. As the Genesis drive began to explode, Dr. Eggman released one last, and very common, scream.

"I HATE THAT HEDGEHOG!"

Sonic ran, planning to find his friends and get them off the *Egg Saucer* before Eggman's latest weapon blew up in his face. But Sonic underestimated the Genesis Ray; It wasn't a mere laser cannon. It was something far greater, and as such, it's reaction from damage was more than an explosion.

There was a great noise, then a light.

There was a great silence, then the light faded.

And the *Egg Saucer* was gone.

The 1st Night

Fuyuki, a small city in the country of Japan. It's only claim to fame was that it had been the site of a great tragedy- the Fire of Fuyuki, as publicists called it. A portion of the city had been consumed by flames, an act of arson equal to the Burning of Rome. While the source of the fire had never been discovered- official sources said the fire had been the result of a gas leak- those who connected dots noticed that there had been several murders- some also linked to gas leaks, others not- in the days before the disaster. In the present day, those same, ignored people noticed that several mysterious deaths- once more attributed to gas leaks- were happening again, and wondered if there was a pattern. They were right.

Sonic wasn't aware of any of this, but he was aware- VERY aware- of the pavement as his face fell onto it. Getting up, he shook his head to make the birdies go away.

"Ugh... Wipe out," Sonic groaned, "What happened...?"

Sonic looked around. The city that surrounded him was still unnervingly still. Either the metropolis was taking a power-nap, or the hedgehog had landed in a ghost town.

"Where am I?" Sonic asked aloud. He looked up at the night sky and didn't recognize the stars. Did the destruction of Eggman's machine send him to another world...?

"Hope Tails, Knux and Amy are okay," Sonic murmured.

Then he heard a scream in the distance. Snapping out of his reverie, Sonic sped off to the source, doing some *Le Parkour* off the buildings in the process.

In a dark alley (Where else), a spear-wielding man in a blue bodysuit with blue stood over his net victim, the corpse of his most recent victim by three seconds lying not too far away.

"P-please..." The poor man whimpered, shivering. "Don't do this..."

"Sorry, but I've got no choice," Lancer replied, scratching the back of his head with his free hand. He used his other hand to point his spear at the man's chest. "Gotta refuel somehow."

Did he ever. Lancer had been summoned as a Servant- a Heroic Spirit whose presence in the physical world was maintained by a mage they were bound to, their Master. Seven Servants were summoned by seven Masters, to fight for the ultimate prize.

Unfortunately, Lancer's current Master did not have the Prana to supply, forcing Lancer to restore himself by draining the energy of living creatures; namely, other humans- Literally, his Master actually ordered him to do it. And if that wasn't bad enough, the coward refused to let the Servant fight! The *modus operandi* so far had been to trade blows for a bit with other Servants, exchange barbs, then leave. Even though the Fake Priest had said it was part of their "Plan for Victory" Lancer wasn't happy with it. Such a boring way to fight a war...

Lancer raised his spear, and stopped. Cocking his head, he wondered if he heard a noise...?

Sonic rammed into Lancer's side with an audible WHAM, sending the spearman flying into a wall.

"Denied!" Sonic remarked, and looked at Lancer's would-be victim and asked, "You okay, mister?"

Struggling to his feet, the trembling man looked to Sonic, then Lancer, before running off, screaming, "I can't handle this!"

"You're welcome!" Sonic called after him.

Sonic then ducked, Lancer's spear just narrowly missing his head. Going into a roll, the hedgehog moved a meter before flipping back onto his feet. "Hey! Wassat for?"

Lancer retracted his weapon and got into a ready stance. "Sorry about that. I just get a little upset when someone interrupts my feeding."

"Feeding?" Sonic was confused- until he saw the body. Sonic's eyes widened as he felt the full impact of what he had prevented- and what he hadn't.

"That your work?" Sonic asked Lancer, trying to keep his voice steady. A storm of emotions was raging inside his mind.

Lancer shrugged, making Sonic angrier. "Yeah. Not pretty, I know, but a guy's gotta get his Mana somehow."

Sonic and Lancer circled each other, never letting the other out of his sight. Lancer had an eager grin on his face- he had no idea what Sonic was (Though he was reminded of those cat-things in the cafe, what was it called again?), he could tell that the creature had more Mana *and* fighting power than the civilians he had been forced to hunt.

Sonic, on the other hand, was *not* smiling. Had Lancer known Sonic, the spearman would have found this very significant. Sonic had initially thought he had prevented a mugging, only to learn that it was a murder he had run into- a second murder, the first of which he had been too late to prevent. He wasn't going to let Lancer get away!

Sonic shot towards Lancer, faster than the Servant had been expecting. Lancer jabbed at Sonic, but the Hedgehog slid under the spear's blade, his momentum carrying him towards Lancer's legs. Lancer jumped to avoid being tripped up. Sonic jumped and rebounded off a wall, leaping back towards the spearman. But Lancer had already turned around, spear ready. Sonic just barely avoided the blade, stepping off of the handle and delivering a few punches to Lancer's face.

Lancer stumbled back and rubbed his jaw. Far from being angry, he was impressed by Sonic's performance. "You're a nimble little guy," The

Heroic Spirit commented, "But I think I'm getting the hang of your style. Only of time before I get to you."

Sonic causally twirled the red spear. "Might take a bit longer than you think, dude."

Lancer blanched. He hadn't realize he had dropped his spear! "Why, you-! Gimme that!"

Lancer rushed towards Sonic, but the Hedgehog was too swift and already running out of the alley. Sonic paused to look back and give the Hound a taunting look.

"Catch me if you can!" He shouted before taking off.

Lancer growled and took after Sonic. You did *not* mess with a man's spear!*

In another part of Fuyuki, a trio of youths- technically, there were four of them, but the fourth was in astral form- walked down the streets, two of them carrying the third. A few hours ago, high school student-slash-amature Mage Emiya Shirou had summoned, accidentally, inadvertently, the Servant Saber, a beautiful lady knight, who saved him from Lancer. Immediately afterwards, Saber attacked Servant Archer, and through that, Shirou learned that the school's idol, Tohsaka Rin, was Archer's Master, and a much more accomplished Mage. Rather than continue the fight, Rin took Shirou to the Fuyuki Church and register for the War for the Holy Grail. From the Church's head Kotomine Kirie, Shirou learned the truth of the Great Fire from ten years ago; that it had been the end result of the previous Grail War. Realizing that the current deaths were not gas leaks, but a Servant feeding off of the victims' Mana, Shirou chose to fight in the War alongside Saber. He had no interest in the Grail itself, but could not allow another tragedy to occur.

Then along came Illya.

After leaving the church, Shirou and co. were confronted by Illyasviel von Einzbern, a sweet little girl of a Mage with a capacity for cruelty as large as her Servant, a mass of muscles called Berserker. Saber and Archer fought back, but their attacks did little against the Heroic Spirit of Herakles. When it seemed that Saber would fall to Berserker's blade, Shirou did something that was acknowledged as a Very Stupid Thing To Do; he took the bullet, gallantly putting himself between his Servant and Illya's. As it was his life that kept Saber bound to the physical world, this made his heroic sacrifice very pointless. But instead of dying logically, Shirou survived, his body an inch away from being two, but still alive. Confused by Shirou's actions and impressed by Archer's abilities, Illya called it a night, promising to come again.

Now, Rin and Saber were carrying Shirou home, in spite of Archer's vocal advice that his master leave the idiot where he lay. Had Shirou been conscious, he would have had an un-gallant response.

Rin glanced for the umpteenth time at Shirou. Even now his body was regenerating at an incredible rate. It didn't make any sense. People normally die when they were killed. She knew that, but Shirou, a mage with such poor magic circuits that they might have been nonexistent, was defying this iron-clad rule. It made no sense!

Little did Rin realize, the rest of the War would be an ongoing assault on her perception on how the world worked.

The three of them were almost to the bridge when a Blue Blur suddenly bounced past them, followed by a *second* blur, also blue. The two that were blue bounced and ran around Rin, Saber and Shiro, engaged in an off-kilter game of Cat-and-Mouse** that had been squeezed into a pinball game.

Rin and Saber watched it all, getting headaches from trying to keep up with the action. Though they were moving too fast to be seen, one blur could be recognized from his voice as he held this intelligent conversation with the other blur.

"Get over here!"

"Nope."

"Give it back!"

"Not happening."

"GRAAH!"

"Too slow!"

"Lancer?" saber asked, blinking. She wondered if she had hit her head during the fight with Berserker. This comical scene couldn't possibly be real.

Lancer pounced an empty space once again, growling from the pavement as Sonic zipped out of his reach again. He then noticed that he had an audience. Straightening up, he put on a cool face; He believed he had a reputation, and wanted to preserve it.

"Yo, Saber," Lancer greeted smoothly, and nodded at Rin. "And Master of Archer," He glanced at Shirou. "What's with him?"

Shirou groaned. Had he been among the awoken, he would have had a sarcastic response ready.

"That is not your concern," Saber replied stiffly, tensing. This was bad. If Lancer started a fight now, she would be at a severe disadvantage. Wait, could Lancer fight? "Where is your spear?"

Lancer cringed. The one topic he hoped would never arise.
"Wwwell..."

POW!

Sonic dropped down onto Lancer from above, plowing the spearman into the street under his sneakers.

"I got it!" The Hedgehog declared. He then noticed the trio before him. Shirou's eyes- bleary, unfocused- met Sonic's. "Whoa, what happened to him? Is he alright?"

Saber and Rin didn't say anything. They weren't sure how to respond- or what they would be responding to.

" *Get offa me!* " Lancer shouted, standing up abruptly.

Sonic fell off Lancer's back, rolling several feet behind to avoid being hurt, and dropped the red spear. Lancer quickly scooped it up and took a fighting stance, the tip pointed directly at Sonic's chest. While he liked a decent fight, and his coward of a Master wasn't letting him find him until now, this high-speed game of Ring Around The Rosy wasn't what he had in mind. Sonic didn't act like a decent warrior. He was more like a clown or acrobat, treating their battle like a show for an unseen audience, never facing his opponent head-on, like Saber did. Sonic just danced about, egging Lancer on but never fighting back, aside from the odd strike when Lancer was distracted- like he did just then! It was time to end this.

" *Gae Bolg!* "

As a warrior chosen to fight in the Heaven's Feel, the Holy Grail had granted Lancer powers and weapons based on his myth- A Noble Phantasm. Lancer's was his spear; when invoked, it would seek out his victim's heart, even piercing through causality to reach it. By the time its name was pronounced, his opponent, unless they had protection of equal or greater rank, would be dead. That was the ancient rule.

But something new had been added.

Lancer's spear struck Sonic, but instead of becoming a spiny blue shish-ka-bob, the Hedgehog's body was knocked back by the tip of the spearhead. Gold rings, not blood, exploded from his body, vanishing as they dropped to the ground.

"AAAARRGGHH!" Sonic cried. Even though the Power Rings protected his body from being damaged, he could still feel the pain from the strike. In this case, it felt a million times worse than all of the other times he had run into spikes.

Around Sonic, all parties were thunderstruck, none more than Lancer. "What the Hell? How did you survive that!?" It was embarrassing enough that Shirou survived, but Sonic wasn't even wounded!

"Uh...you weren't moving like that before. How..." As he shook off the pain, Sonic's eyes narrowed. "Wait...it's not your speed, you're using that spear to warp!"

"Dammit!" Lancer gripped his spear and prepared to attack. Though he wasn't visibly wounded, Sonic definitely seemed hurt by the previous strike. Maybe if he used repeated attacks... " Gae- "

Pow! Lancer stumbled back as Sonic's feet slammed into his face. The Hedgehog wasn't going to let Lancer use his power again, that was for sure. With his soles pressed against the Hound's cheeks, Sonic made another grab for the red spear, but was shaken off before he could get it.

"Cut that out!" Lancer shouted, taking another swipe at the Hedgehog. Sonic evaded the spear, doing a backflip that put him between Lancer and the others. Glancing back at the girls (and Shirou), Sonic knew that he couldn't fight seriously while there was a chance that group could be caught in the crossfire- a reservation that Lancer didn't seem to have. Sonic needed to move the fight away from any innocents if he wanted to take the spearman down.

Dodging another attempted stab, Sonic ran up to Lancer and gave him a punch. "Tag! You're it!"

And with that, Sonic sped off, with Lancer yelling as he followed close behind.

After that, silence ruled. The only sound in the lull came from Shirou, who was now healthy enough to be conscious. He asked, "What... just happened?"

Sonic led Lancer out towards a highway. At this time of night, there were no cars on the road. The perfect place for a rumble, in Sonic's opinion.

The two chased each other down the highway, making hit and run tactics as best they could. Lancer tried to stab Sonic multiple times, which the Hedgehog dodged. In between jabs Sonic would make his own strikes at Lancer, using his Homing Attack whenever he saw an opening. While Sonic technically had better luck than Lancer in the scoring hits department, Lancer didn't seem too affected by the Hedgehog's blows- if anything, he got more and more riled up as the fight went on. Sonic knew he needed to pull out the big guns.

Sonic stopped, and Lancer shot ahead several hundred meters before realizing what had happened. The spearman squinted as he tried to look at the blue speck in the distance.

'What's he up to now?' Lancer thought.

Sonic shot forward, not going at the speeds he had been at before- this was much faster. Sonic rarely did this, it was too dangerous, and could cause significant property damage. It was also hard to find a place where he could build up the velocity safely, for him and other people. But the most important thing would be the timing; Sonic had hit it just as he was passing Lancer, or it would all be a waste.

Seeing Sonic's charge, the Servant in question braced himself. His instincts told him that Sonic was planning to attack with all his might. If his timing was right, though, he would use the Hedgehog's own speed to skewer him into his spear.

But when Sonic reached Lancer, something happened that the spearman hadn't been expecting.

BOOM

The air around Lancer exploded with a force he had never experienced, tossing him like a rag doll off the highway. As his eardrums rattled, the Heroic Spirit of Cu Chulainn had one last thought before darkness claimed him;

"I hate that hedgehog."

Sonic grinned as he watched Lancer's body fly through the air. However, because of that, Sonic didn't see the sign he passed, the one that said, "Road Incomplete". He *did* see that further ahead the road ended, becoming an impromptu ramp. Unfortunately, Sonic was going far too fast to stop in time, and so the sound-barrier breaking momentum carried him off the pavement and into the air...

...Almost ethereal, Sonic's form became a silhouette against the moon...

...and the Hedgehog was falling back down to Fuyuki...

Emiya Shirou sighed. So far, tonight had been very stressful. Even cooking wasn't doing much to take the edge off. The weight of everything that had happened continued to press on him; Almost getting killed by Lancer, summoning Saber, learning about the war from Kotomine, and finally, almost dying *again*, this time at the hands of the monstrous Berserker. It was a blessing he had even survived.

And then there was that blue creature. At first, Shirou had thought it been a pain-induced hallucination, but after (Somehow) recovering, Rin and Saber had confirmed that, yes, a midget-animal in sneakers had thrown Lancer around.

One good thing had happened, though. In the face of all that they had seen, Rin proposed an alliance to deal with Berserker, and that blue creature (The word "Hedgehog" appeared and vanished in

Shirou's mind). Shirou was glad to have her help- while he had no desire for the grail's wish, he would need aid protecting the civilians- if Rin was as good at Magecraft as she was at schoolwork, then she would be a tremendous asset.

Shirou finished in the kitchen and served his and Saber's late dinner. Though it was a simple meal of sushi and rice, Saber gladly dove into it, asking for seconds before Shirou could even finish his first portion.

After her Master complied, Saber said, "Shirou, if I had a cook like you during my time, meals would have been a dream."

"Really?" Shirou asked, pleased to hear that his cooking had her approval. "What were the chefs like in your era?"

The air became very cold, and so did Saber's expression. "Not as good."

The steel in Saber's voice was sharper than the sword she wielded earlier. In that instant, Shirou swore to never bring up the topic again, and to always be on time with meals.

With that distressing subject passed, eating resumed. Before Saber could properly berate Shirou for stupidly jumping in front Berserker's sword, and implore him to never do it again, they heard a "Whump!" from outside.

"What was that?" Shirou asked, getting up.

Saber was already on her feet. "Shirou, stay here!" She ordered, heading towards the yard. As she moved, she felt her Master's presence following her, to her dismay.

Outside, they saw what had made the noise. Lying face first in the grass was Lancer's opponent.

Shirou and Saber took Sonic into the Emiya Estate dojo and waited for him to wake up. They did not have to wait long. Sonic's eyes fluttered a bit, then he pushed himself up. Saber and Sonic tensed, unsure what to expect.

"Ugh...where am I...?" Sonic asked, looking around blearily. When he saw the Master and Servant, it took him a few moments to remember that he had seen them before and where. "Hey, aren't you two..."

"You're in the training hall of my family's home," Shirou explained, "We found you passed out in my backyard and brought you in here."

"Cool. Thanks for that," Sonic jumped into a backflip onto his feet. "I'm Sonic, Sonic the Hedgehog, by the way."

"Emiya Shirou," The red-haired teen returned, and gestured to Saber. "This is Saber."

"It is nice to meet you," Saber greeted, nodding formally. "Sonic... could you please tell us how appeared on this property?"

"Well, you saw that guy I was fighting, right?" Sonic began, "When I saw how normal hits weren't working, so I gave him a Sonic Boom. Problem was, I was moving too fast and ended up flying off the highway."

"Why were you on the highway?" Shirou asked.

"Less property damage," Sonic explained, and grinned cheekily. "See, when I call it a Sonic Boom, I'm not being egotistical...not *too* much, anyway."

Shirou stared, thunderstruck by what Sonic was implying. "...You can move fast enough to break the sound barrier?" "What *are* you?"

"Yeah, but I try not to in cities. All that broken glass, y'know?"

There was a brief silence as Master and Servant processed this.

"What *are* you, Sonic?" Saber asked, speaking Shirou's mind. "I have never seen a creature like you before in this world, and you are capable of fighting a Servant on equal ground."

"This world'?" Sonic repeated. He crossed his arms and tapped his foot in thought. After a moment, he slapped his forehead. "Awww, man! I must gotten blasted into another dimension! I hate it when that happens!"

At Shirou and Saber's confusion, Sonic regaled them with his adventure aboard the Egg Saucer. Once he was done...their confusion wasn't abated in the least. If anything, they had even more questions.

"But, how could a machine send you from your world to ours?" Shirou asked, trying to wrap his head around it. As far as he knew, travel between universes was one of few True Magics, Magecraft that could not be replicated by technology.

"The Chaos Emeralds," Sonic answered, "These gemstones with all sorts of power in 'em. There are seven, and if you get them all, the ultimate power is unleashed. Eggman had them powering his Genesis Ray."

"Incredible..." Was all Shirou could say. Earlier, he would have said it was impossible, but after what he had seen tonight, and who he was talking to, he couldn't. His skepticism was burned out.

"Now, you need to answer a few of my questions," Sonic said, "What's this Servant you were talking about? I don't think you meant a a maid or butler."

There was a brief pause as Shirou and Saber considered their next move. Finally, it was Shirou who broke the silence. "A Servant is a Heroic Spirit, a legendary warrior summoned by magic into the physical world to fight for the Holy Grail."

Saber gave her Master a startled look. "Shirou-!"

"Saber, it's better that he knows," Shirou argued, "He's already taken on Lancer and won- it won't hurt anything for him to have the full story."

"But..."

"I know what the rules are, that's why we have to tell Sonic," Shirou explained, "If not, he might expose the War by accident."

Saber frowned, but did not argue. She did not want to admit it, but Sonic had fared far better against Lancer than she had during their brief clash. However, he seemed to have a devil-may-care attitude born of arrogance- and that always brought about disaster. They were fortunate that Sonic and Lancer had fought at night. Had the two dueled during the day, there would no way to cover it up; Sonic's very existence could expose the existence of Magecraft. He needed to know to be more discreet. And so, Shirou told Sonic about Magecraft, what little he knew, and about what he learned about the Holy Grail War from Kotomine.

"So that guy, Lancer, is what, some kinda magic ghost?" Sonic asked, tapping his feet.

"If that helps you understand it..." Shirou replied, "Servant's can still be killed though, and, excepting the special abilities they receive from their legends, have the same weaknesses humans have."

"Okay, but why all this...codename stuff?"

"The Holy Grail gives a Heroic Spirit summoned as a Servant powers and abilities based on their legend," Saber answered, "That includes any weaknesses they might have. If one knows their legend, then one can also determine their powers and flaws."

"Like, if you knew you were fighting Achilles, you'd know to go after his heel?" Sonic asked.

"Correct," Saber nodded, glad to see Sonic catching on. "That is why I am known only as Saber for this War. It is in my best interests that my true name be hidden."

Sonic rubbed his nose in thought. "So, is there a way to figure out a Servant's myth? Or do we just ask real nicely?"

"We just need to be observant," Saber told him, "If knowing their name could help us figure out their abilities, then the inverse is true. Though we might get lucky and some overconfident Servant might just give us their name as a gesture of faith." She couldn't help but think about the Fourth War's Rider, who brazenly declared himself as Alexander the Great. It was unlikely that someone that boisterous would appear this time around, but as she had seen, the world sometimes threw a curveball when least expected to.

Sonic grunted and closed his eyes. "But are the Servants in this thing really heroes? I caught Lancer trying to kill someone," He opened his eyes slightly and looked at the floor. "After he had already gutted someone else..."

Shirou saw the pain in Sonic's eyes. It was the same pain he himself felt every time he heard about the 'mysterious deaths' on the news. In that instance, Shirou felt a kinship to this abnormal creature from another world.

"Sonic, you must understand that even though Heroic Spirits are famed in song and legend as paragons, they are, or were, human beings once," Saber said, "And they lived in turbulent times, constantly surrounded by death. I understand your disapproval, but to some of these Spirits the deaths of ordinary people in pursuit of the Grail is a minor consequence."

"But why?" Sonic asked, "I mean, Servants are supposed to fight other Servants, so what's the point of going after bystanders?"

"I talked about this with another Master I know earlier," Shirou put in. He decided that he wouldn't mention Rin by name just yet. She was

going to have a fit when she learned that he told an 'outsider' about the War. "We think it's because Lancer's Master can't supply him with Prana. Each Servant is supposed to receive Prana from their Master, but some Master's aren't strong enough give them the amount they need to use their Noble Phantasm." *I know I'm not.*

"Right, the magic weapon thing," Sonic rubbed his chest. "I think I got a bruise from where Lancer tried to skewer me."

Now was the perfect time Saber to ask what was to her the most important question. "Sonic, how *did* you survive Lancer's Noble Phantasm?"

Sonic reached into the glove on his left hand and pulled out something gold. "Power Rings. These babies will protect you from any damage, *especially* the kind from pointy objects."

He tossed Saber one Ring, and she examined it closely. It was small, but she could sense a measure of energy emitting from it. If she hadn't seen it happen, she wouldn't believe that the Ring could stop Lancer's *Gae Bolg*. She held it towards Shirou for her Master to see. He wished he had some when Lancer and Berserker attacked, at which point the still wounded area where Berserker's sword had hit tingled, making Shirou twitch slightly.

"How much protection can you get from one Ring?" Shirou asked, amazed.

"Just one's enough for anything," Sonic answered, "But they fall out from wherever you're holding them when you get hit and vanish after a few seconds. The more you have the easier it'll be to scoop some back up."

Just one... "Would you mind if I kept this?" Shirou asked, taking the Ring from Saber.

Sonic shrugged. "Nah, I've got twelve more. In fact..." He tossed a second Ring to Saber. "You can have one, too. Never hurts to have a

little insurance, right?"

Saber's hand closed over the Ring slowly. "...No, I suppose it does not." While she did not like having to borrow another's power, after her failure in the Fourth War, and the loss of her scabbard, Saber did not want to take any chances. And if Shirou was going to continue being needlessly reckless, then he would require some additional protection. Though if her hunch was correct...

"Hey, this has been bugging me," Sonic piped up, "But if every Master in this War some kind of wizard-"

"Mage." Shirou corrected automatically.

"Huh?"

"The Masters are mages, not wizards." Shirou explained, "Mages perform Magecraft, which is magic that can be reproduced by technology. A wizard can use one of the True Magics-"

Sonic held up a hand "'Kay...not really caring. Point is, can *you* do magic?"

Shirou nodded, though a little annoyed his exposition was cut off. "Yes, I'm a mage...though not a very good one. I summoned Saber by accident. And half the time, the spells I know don't work."

Sonic tapped his foot thoughtfully. "So...what kind of magic can you do?"

"Just three kinds," Shirou replied, and held up three fingers. "Reinforcement, Structural Analysis, and Projection."

"What, what, and what?"

"Reinforcement is, strictly speaking, the strengthening of a physical object. More specifically, it's the pushing a basis to the utmost," Shirou explained. It felt odd talking about this with someone who didn't already know Magecraft. Before he found out Rin was a mage,

the only other one he knew was his deceased foster father, Kiritsugi. "For example, I could make a rolled-up newspaper as hard as a steel rod, or a knife sharper, or even improve my eyesight."

Sonic hummed, and was gone in a flash. Less than a second passed before Sonic returned. He had something in his hand.

It was a rolled-up newspaper.

"Show me." The Hedgehog said.

Shirou took the paper, and concentrated. "Trace On."

As always when he practiced Magecraft, he felt a sensation like a hit metal rod being put in his spine as he formed Mage Circuits. This time, however, there was a faint buzz that he barely acknowledged...

I sw..d...

Shirou held the paper out to Sonic. "Try bending it."

Sonic did so. The newspaper folded easily in his grip. Sonic raised an eyebrow, his face otherwise expressionless. Off to the side, Saber had her head lowered.

"I *said* I wasn't good at magic." Shirou defended weakly.

"So...what were the other two?" Sonic asked.

Still embarrassed at his failure, Shirou said, "Structural Analysis and Projection. The first is what it sounds like sounds like- I use my Magecraft to analyze a physical object- what it's made of, its history, and so forth."

"That sounds...kinda boring." Sonic noted.

"It's actually my useful magic," Shirou defended, "I've been able to fix all sorts of things by..." Shirou trailed off under Sonic's unimpressed gaze. He decided to move on. "Projection is the materialization of a

physical object into the world. It's basically creating something from nothing."

Sonic brightened. "Now, *that* sounds awesome. You just snap your fingers if you need something, and poof, it's there?"

"It's...not as easy as it sounds," Shirou said weakly, "I've never been good at it. And my mentor always said it was a worthless skill to have, anyway."

"Why's that?"

Shirou sighed. "Everything created by the spell is weaker than the original, and it's existence can be broken easily. There's no point."

"Geez, with that attitude, no wonder you suck," Sonic groaned, "Look, man, I don't know anything about magic, but I do know that you're not gonna get good at anything if you don't have a little confidence. I know it sounds corny, but you can do a lot if you just believe in yourself."

Shirou was about to protest, to tell Sonic that he was being too idealistic, but found that he couldn't. He looked to Saber, and found that she was now looking at him with a cool intensity. Her expression was neutral, but she seemed to be...searching for something? Shirou looked back at Sonic helplessly.

"I just said you suck, bro," Sonic reminded, "You wanna let that slide?"

And that's when Shirou realized why he couldn't refuse Sonic. He dreamed of being a hero someday, but his aspirations were not taken seriously by his peers. "There's no such thing anymore" The more vindictive of them had said, and even close friends merely regarded his goals as childish. But now, standing in front of him was a hero; He may have looked like something that belonged in an American anime, and he had a cocky attitude that was a bit too much like the kind held by his estranged friend Shinji Matou, but

somewhere in Sonic's eyes Shirou could see a strength, a conviction...a will similar to his own.

And now this hero from another world was trying to determine his strength. Shirou couldn't let himself look uncool now!

"...No, I'm not." The Master of Saber said. But what to Project? Seeing as they were in a training hall, he decided on a kendo training sword.

Holding out his hand and forming his circuits, Shirou said his invocation.

" *Trace On.* "

Out in the backyard of the Emiya Estate was a shed. From the outside, it was not terribly interesting to look at. Currently, Shirou used it as both a storage room for the various repair jobs, and as a place where he practiced his Magecraft. In the center of the shed's floor, surrounded by the piles of fixed objects, a magic circle had been left there. It was formed by the previous tenant of the estate.

And it was now glowing.

Underneath the floorboards it sat, just waiting to be found. The yellow gem had not been there until a few short hours ago, but now it seemed to have always been existed in that place.

It's light began to flicker.

Shirou suddenly felt something akin to an explosion within him. This was followed by a sensation like his nerves being set on fire- no, not *on* fire. It was more like his nerves *becoming* fire. But what happened next was much, much, worse.

"AAAARRRGHH!" Shirou screamed in pain as swords, yellow energy shaped like swords, began to rip their way out from his body. Saber and Sonic rushed to the young mage's aid, only stunned by half a second by this development.

And just as sudden as it happened, it ended. The yellow energy-swords vanished and Shirou collapsed. Both Saber and Sonic caught Shirou's body before it hit the floor, and after gently putting him down, they saw just how bad the damage was. Unlike the great cleave delivered by Berserker, the wounds that Shirou now had were less clean and more numerous. Despite the rage that gripped his mind, Berserker had been quite efficient in trying to rend Shirou in two. Gruesome, but professional. Now though, Shirou's body looked as if someone had done a hack job (Pun unintended), with multiple messy, bloody holes...that were now healing?

Sonic looked blurry, a visual effect of fidgeting at sonic-speed. "Ohmanomanoman! Where's the hospital?! I'll zip him over there!"

"Sonic!" Saber ordered, "There's a first-aid kit in the kitchen, under the sink!"

Sonic was gone the minute Saber said "kitchen" and back before should say "sink". He also had a phone in his other hand, along with some a roll of paper towels under his arm. The two quickly set to clueing Shirou's wounds, and all the while Sonic kept talking.

"...
istheemergencynumbereoneoneherethisguynneedshelpmaybewecanrigawheelchair-"

"That will not be necessary." Saber cut in as she applied disinfectant. She saw Shirou wince in pain, relieved that he still had the strength to do so.

"What are you saying!? Shirou's... *getting better?* "

Sonic stopped, stunned at what he was seeing. But he could not deny that Shirou's torn flesh was regrowing!

"But...how?" Sonic closed his eyes and tapped the side of his head. "Right, magic."

Yes, it was magic, and more importantly, it was a kind Saber understood all too well. She now held no doubts. The only way this amateur mage could have both summoned her and recover from such serious injury was because of Avalon- her lost sheath. The fact that Shirou shared the same family name as her previous master, Kiritsugi (AKA, 'The double-crossing assassin that stole victory when it was within her grasp'), only strengthened the notion.

But why was Avalon's power now acting twice as much? Was the Power Ring Sonic lent Shirou bolstering the sheath somehow?

Regardless, there wasn't much for Sonic and Saber to do except wait for Shirou to heal himself, helping wherever they could. A half hour had passed before Shirou opened his eyes.

"Saber...?" The young mage murmured.

"Shirou." Saber's stoic face relaxed slightly. She was on her knees next to Shirou as he lay on the training hall floor. On Shirou's other side was Sonic, sitting on his rear. He had a guilty expression on- no doubt he felt responsible for the incident, having encouraged Shirou to cast the spell.

"You okay, man?" The Hedgehog asked tentatively, reaching out to Shirou.

"Yeah," Shirou replied. Seeing Sonic's face, he added, "I don't know what happened. The spell's never done that before."

Sonic grinned mirthlessly. "Well, uh, it's a good thing you can heal, right?"

"...Yeah, good thing."

Shirou found himself starting to grin as well. His body still hurt in places, but the pain was rapidly fading. And he knew now that he and Saber had a new ally to fight in the Holy War.

Saber, meanwhile, found her eyes drifting towards the Command Seals on Shirou's hand. They symbolized the bond between the two of them, and allowed Shirou three "Absolute Orders", commands given through the ritual that she could not refuse. It may have been her imagination, but now it seemed that the seals were glowing...

This is going to be a very different war. The Heroic Spirit thought.

She had no idea how right she was.

Having established both that Shirou was not going to die and an alliance with Team Saber, Rin decided that she and Archer should call it a night. Too much had happened tonight, and they both needed to collect their thoughts on what they had seen. Meeting Illya and her monster of Servant had been scary enough, but seeing that weird blue creature fighting Lancer blew whatever expectations about the Holy War out of the water- for different reasons.

Rin could only suppose that Lancer's opponent- whatever it was- was some sort of animal spirit, or perhaps a familiar summoned by the Caster of this war. She would have to consult her family library on the subject, and hope to find an answer. She recalled the horrible monsters brought forth by the Fourth War's Caster, and shuddered slightly, knowing how close she came to being killed by both them and that Caster's twisted Master. She could only hope that the Caster this time- and their Master- was of a slightly more stable character.

Archer, meanwhile, had another concern. He was a unique Heroic Spirit, being from the future. Summoned across time by Rin's attempt to summon "The Strongest Servant" (A ritual he privately,

albeit arrogantly, believed to have succeeded), Archer hoped to change his own miserable future by murdering his past self, believing that the paradox would erase himself from existence. Anything would be better than the living Hell his own foolish idealism put himself into.

But the appearance of that spiny blue guy in sneakers threw a monkey wrench into those hopes. Archer's memories of the Fifth War may have been vague, but he was pretty sure nothing like that creature had appeared. Either his summons had altered the timeline more than he thought, or he was in a completely alternate universe altogether.

Before Archer could put more thought into the subject, he saw a column of smoke far ahead- right where the Tohsaka mansion was!

"Rin, stay here!" Archer ordered, and rushed ahead before his Master could respond. Reinforcing his legs, he made good time and saw that, thankfully, the large Western-style house wasn't on fire. The grounds behind the house, on the other hand, were now a total mess. And in the center of that mess was a damaged vehicle with smoke coming out where the engine probably was.

Archer, what is it? Rin asked through their telepathic bond, *What's going on?*

Someone's crashed a plane into your backyard.

What?!

It was a red, high-tech bi-plane of sorts. On its side was the word "SONIC" and on its tail fin was a picture of a star within a winged red ring. The wings of the plane itself had broken off in the crash, and other pieces of metal were scattered around the yard. And in the cockpit, slumped over and unconscious, was a small, furry creature of a pilot...a little person very much like a fox.

With two tails.

Archer thought, *a kitsune?*

Despite of how easy it looks on television, entering another dimension was no simple trick. Depending on how you went about it, doing so would cause vibrations anyone could feel. Because it happened during their fight with Berserker, neither Team Saber or Team Archer had felt the shock of the worlds tearing open to let Sonic and company in. The other mages in Fuyuki, however, were all too aware that something big had happened. The fact that for one brief moment, all magecraft within the city had been bolstered gave them more reason to send out all manner of familiars and divinations to investigate this phenomena.

At the gate of the Ryuudou Temple, the Servant Assassin sighed. He had felt the strange vibrations in the region, followed shortly after by the sound of an explosion of sorts coming from the highway. He would have loved to go out and investigate- Any reason to get away from his current 'master' and her endless fawning over *her* master- but was bound to remain at his post as a sentry...a glorified guard dog.

I'm so bored , Assassin thought, Maybe I should ask that boy Issei if he'd bring me a book or something.

Then Assassin saw a small figure walk up the steps toward the gate. It was a small animal-person of sorts, with red fur, spiked gloves, and sneakers. Around his head hung several dreadlock-like quills.

"Oh? It's not often we receive visitors at this hour," Assassin noted aloud, "Is there something I can help you with, little one?"

Knuckles grimaced at the 'Little one' remark, and said, "Yeah, I'm a little lost. Where am I?"

"You are at the entrance of the Ryuudou Temple, in the city of Fuyuki, my red friend."

Knuckles raised an eyebrow. "Fuyuki? Where's that in relation to Station Square?"

Assassin's smile dropped somewhat. "I'm afraid I've never heard of such a place. Is that where you're from?"

Knuckles groaned and rubbed his face. So the explosion sent him to an entirely different world. *That* figured.

Assassin said, "I see from the look on your face that you seem to be a long way from your home."

"Brother, you have no idea."

Assassin put on a sympathetic smile. "Well, I would like to offer you a place to rest, but sadly, the old bag I have to call Master has a strict policy against visitors. She's a bit of a cheapskate, you see."

"Now, Assassin, don't tell lies."

Assassin turned his head and Knuckles looked past the samurai's shoulders. Walking towards them was a beautiful adult woman, who's features above her nose were hidden by purple hood that extended into an elaborate cape.

"I may enjoy my privacy, but I could *never* turn out a lost soul into the night," Caster said, and to Knuckles asked, "Why don't you come in, and tell me what's troubling you? Perhaps I can help."

Knuckles looked at Assassin, who shrugged in response. The Psuedo-Servant had no real interest in what happened, but Knuckles took his act to mean, "She's trustworthy, go right in."

"All right, I need to get my head straight anyway. Thanks." Knuckles replied, walking past Assassin.

Caster's smile grew even more.

Amy Rose walked through a dark ally. Though she didn't know it, she was in a bad part of Fuyuki, but she did know that her friends were no where in sight. Thankfully, there were no evil robots, but this was a small comfort. Alone and in an unfamiliar place, only past experience kept Amy cool in the face of the unknown.

The pink hedgehog shivered. Maybe it was too cool. There was a chill in the air that she didn't like.

I wonder how Sonic and the guys do it, going around in just gloves and shoes. Amy thought, then spotted something odd in the distance.

It was a human with short cut light red hair, dressed in a dark red suit. Getting closer, Amy saw that it was woman, though the distinction was hard to make in the dark- the slight curves around her body helped. One of the sleeves for her suit was gone, torn off, apparently. She seemed to be sitting against a wall, staring at her bare arm.

"Um, are you all right?" Amy called out as she approached the woman. She could now see that this was a silly question, as this stranger, judging from how ruffled her clothes were, had certainly been in a fight. Judging from the bruises and cuts all over her body, it was must have been a very bad one...

Amy felt something sticky under her heel, and looked down. It was difficult to see in the night, but it looked like a red liquid...

Amy heard a soft thud, and saw that the woman had fallen over. Putting the sticky red stuff and the woman's condition together equaled...

Amy gasped and rushed to the stranger's aid. Pulling her up as best as she could with her smaller frame, Amy looked around, trying to figure out what to do or where to go.

"Hey! Is anyone else here?!" Amy cried out into the night, " *Anyone!?*"
" When Amy received no answer, she decided that the next logical thing to do was to take the woman herself. Dragging this injured person out of the ally as comfortably as she could, Amy said to her charge, "Don't worry, I'll find you some help, just hold on!"

Because she was so focused on the task at hand, she didn't hear Bazett Fraga McRemitz moan, "My...arm..."

Chaos was not destruction. Chaos was not anarchy. And it certainly wasn't spelled with a K. Chaos was change. Whether it was a small gust of wind that blew into a tidal wave, or the large meteor that possibly killed the dinosaurs, or even the decision chaos was the unknown factor that made sure the best laid plans of mice and men (And women, some of whom are sticklers for unnecessary details) did not have such a smooth course. Bumps in the road of life.

One of those bumps was forming in the ominous Matou mansion, triggered by the energy given off by Shirou's warped*** attempt at Projection. In her gloomy living space, Sakura Matou woke from her sleep. Shivering, she tried to determine what had happened. She felt a strange flicker, like a static shock, only inside of her mind. She hoped her grandfather had not decided to give some supplementary "training". God knew he did enough to her already...

"Can't sleep, huh?"

Sakura's eyes widened and she turned on the lamp. Looking around she saw something...peculiar.

A shadowy figure was now in her room. No, it wasn't shadowy...it was a shadow. It looked like vaguely humanoid silhouette sitting in the center of the floor. At first, it was pure black, with no features, but then a red-crescent appeared on its 'head' to form a bizarre smile of sorts.

"What are you...?" Sakura whispered.

the shadow-thing began to shake, making a "hn-hn-hn" noise. Sakura's first thought was that the creature was crying, but then she realized that it was just the opposite; the shadow was *laughing*.

"What are you?" Sakura repeated, louder this time.

The shadow's tilted its blob-like head, and then turned towards Sakura, although without eyes the young lady wasn't sure what its intentions were.

Then a voice came from the shadow. It was small, but it had a resonance that stirred something within Sakura.

"I have heard the call and have answered the summons," The shadow said, "I am Servant Avenger."

TO BE CONTINUED

*Not an innuendo

** Or, Hound-and-Hedgehog

*** "Failed" would not be appropriate term to use. Technically, Shirou *did* Project something...

Tiger Dojo

Taiga: Hohhhh! Welcome, young ones! Are you doing well? Appearing now from the ends of space, it's the Tiger Dojo! I am your instructor, Fujimura Taiga, Gaaow!

Illya: And the number one student, Illya! Please treat me with respect!

Taiga: I suppose you are wondering what we are doing now. Number one student, answer!

Illya: Right! In the original visual novel, *Fate/Stay Night* , the Tiger Dojo was a special corner that provides tips and advice for stupid players whose poor decisions led to Shirou getting a bad end. Now, though, we are here to answer any questions you might have for this crossover. In short, we are the structure that keeps the house of "Fate" standing proud and erect!

Taiga: Excellent! Yes, this Dojo is the foundation that holds "Fate" up! Now, our first question comes from Ms. Miyu. She writes, "Dear Tiger Dojo, how is it that Sonic can fight Lancer so effortlessly? Aren't Servants supposed to be beyond the capabilities of mortal beings?" The answer to that is simple: *Sonic is awesome!*

Illya: That answer's *too* simple...

Taiga: Sonic fights killer robots, destructive demons, mutants, evil genies, and even Gods! He is far beyond what any human can do! Lancer was outmatched from the very beginning!

Illya: I don't know, up until the Boom, Sonic didn't seem to be hurting Lancer very much...more like annoying him.

Taiga: Wrong! (*Hits Illya*)

Illya: Ow...the dreaded *Tora-Shina* ...! To think it would be unleashed so suddenly...!

Taiga: Sonic was only extending the fight because he believed Lancer was an ordinary human being. Once he decided that holding back wasn't going to cut it, he unleashed his killer technique and won hands down. Also, it's possible that the Chaos Emeralds entering Fuyuki may have disrupted the natural flow of power.

Illya: Like how Shirou almost killed himself doing magic?

Taiga: Perhaps. And remember, while Sonic is perfectly used to fighting weird guys like Lancer, Lancer's never fought anyone like Sonic before. It was a matter of superior experience. Their next

battle may be more even now that Lancer knows what he's dealing with. Now, read the next question, Student No. 1!

Illya: This comes from someone named Ruby. Ruby writes, "I want Saber to fight a robot!" Hey, that's not a question!

Taiga: Saber will definitely fight a robot! And so will everyone else! Student No. 1, do the disclaimer!

Illya: *Sonic* is owned by Sega, and *Fate* is owned by Type-Moon.

Taiga: That concludes the Q&A! I will see you at the next practice!

Illya: See you soon, everyone!

Disillusion

Chapter 2 : *Disillusion*

Far out in the ocean, the *Egg Saucer* floated. It was like an gaudy, overly technical piece of litter, or an exaggerated bath toy thrown in the river of life. It was far enough from Asia that no one in the continent noticed its abrupt appearance...for now.

In the battleship's central control station, Dr. Eggman worked tirelessly on a computer, trying to assess just what he had lost...and what he could salvage. In stations lower than his own, the doctor's robot assistants, Orbot and Cubot, also worked, examining other, less vital components of the *Egg Saucer* .

"Well, what's the damage?" Eggman demanded as he analyzed the Genesis Ray through his terminal. So far it *seemed* like it could be fixed...

"Judging from this preliminary scan, it appears as though we lost the Chaos Emeralds in the crash," Orbot reported. He rubbed his round head in thought. "With the absence of the emeralds, we have no way to maintain flight capabilities. Also, before the accident, Amy Rose and Knuckles the Echinda attacked our Egg Pod storage facility, so Badnik production is at a standstill."

"Figures," Eggman grumbled, "What's our position? How long before GUN sends an agent?"

"I'm...not sure if they'll be able to," Orbot responded slowly, as if confused. "I've been tapping into radio and satellite transmissions, and I don't recognize any of the data being streamed. Furthermore, I've examined the positions of the stars- none of the constellations matches our current star charts. I can only presume that we've been knocked a bit further off the map than we're used to."

"You mean we've been shot into another world?" Eggman groaned, and slapped his forehead. "Not again! I *hate* it when that happens! They *never* have anything I like on TV..."

"I got some good news, boss," Cubot piped up, "I can't find a trace of Sonic or his friends aboard. They musta fallen off and drowned!"

"I'll believe *that* when I see it," Eggman grumbled, "No, not even then. I once shot that pest into space and he *still* came back! No, until we can examine the bodies for clarity, we're putting Sonic, Tails, Knuckles and Amy under MIA."

A beeping began, catching the attention of the rogue scientist and his automated adjutants. Eggman pushed a button on his own terminal to investigate the matter. His screen switched from a read-out on the Genesis Ray's diagnostics to display a radar map, showing Eggman the shapes of unfamiliar landmasses. On a smaller island-nation, a bright yellow dot could be seen flashing very quickly.

"We're picking the energy of a Chaos Emerald!" The mad doctor chortled, and slapped his hands together. "Excellent!"

"Don't you mean, ' *eggcellent* '?" Cubot asked cheerily. He got looks of irritation (From Eggman) and bewilderment (From Orbot) in return. The yellow robot retracted into his cube-mode in shame.

"...No," Eggman replied, and turned back to his terminal. "Looks like it's coming from the largest island in our general vicinity."

"Should I prepare your Egg Mobile?" Orbot asked, floating up to Dr. Eggman.

"No, I need to oversee the repairs to the *Egg Saucer* . No way I'm leaving it to you two after the half-baked job you did for my Big Boy." Eggman growled, giving Orbot a mean glare. He was somewhat pleased to see the red robot retract into his own orb-mode in shame.

"But, if you are not going, what are we going to do?" Orbot asked, "We have no Badniks to spare."

Eggman smirked. "No, but I still have my sub-bosses."

He entered a command, and his screen went to a view of one of the *Egg Saucer* 's hanger bays. The camera panned over several large and menacing-looking robots, until stopping on what looked like a big, red, flying saucer.

"I'll think I'll send Arms." The evil doctor decided, the light from the computer screen gleaming ominously off of his glasses.

It was early morning at the Emiya home, and Shirou woke up feeling surprisingly energetic. Taking a stretch, he took off his shirt to feel the places on his body where Berserker's sword, and later, the energy blades he created, had almost ripped it to shreds. He was surprised and a bit scared to find there was no trace of the injuries- not even the faintest scar.

Well, it's probably better that way, Shirou decided, putting his shirt back on as he got up. It would attract too much attention if people thought I was attacked. Fuji- Nee would flip if she thought I was getting into fights, and Sakura would worry about me too...

Thinking about his guardian and self-proclaimed "Big sister" Fujimura Taiga and and his underclassman from school Matou Sakura reminded Shirou that he had to make breakfast- the two ladies always showed up at his house in the morning for the meal, Sakura to prepare, and Taiga to mooch. While Shirou didn't so much mind the latter, he was always embarrassed at how much Sakura tried to do around the house.

On his way to the kitchen, Shirou stopped at another room to check up on Saber. The Emiya estate was large, and there were plenty of rooms for the Servant to stay in- or hide in, as the case was. In order to keep Shirou's position as a Master in the Grail War secret, it was

decided that as few people should know about Saber. And since she couldn't for some reason, turn into astral form like other Servants could, this meant sequestering her in a spare room when company was coming over. Saber wasn't happy with the arrangement, as she felt she had to be as close to Shirou as possible for his protection. She even went as far as insisting to sleep in the same room as Shirou was, much to the Mage's embarrassment and Sonic's amusement. It took some convincing, and finally a threat to use a Command Seal to make Saber compromise to stay in the spare room closest to Shirou's.

Sonic, meanwhile had done the opposite and taken a room much further away for himself. When asked why, the Hedgehog had teased that he didn't want to hear anything if either Shirou or Saber "Got lonely for each other's company.", to Shirou's repeated embarrassment.

To his surprise, (Or maybe not) he found Saber was already awake, and sitting on her knees.

"Good morning, Shirou." Saber greeted cordially.

"Good morning, Saber," Shirou returned, "You're up early."

"Of course. If I am to protect you, that means I have to be ready at all times in case there is danger," Saber explained, "I cannot allow our enemies even the slightest chance to attack."

"That's, um, very professional of you," Shirou replied tactfully, "But please don't go out of your way to wear yourself out. I can take care of myself to a degree."

Saber hummed. Shirou wasn't sure if that meant she took his claim seriously.

"Anyway, I've got to prepare breakfast for Taiga and Sakura," Shirou went on. He had already told Saber and Sonic about his surrogate

family. "Could you check on Sonic and make sure he stays out of sight?"

"Very well." Saber said, standing up.

As Shirou got to work in the kitchen, Saber went to Sonic's room. Looking inside, she found that instead of the futon, Sonic had used the sheet Shirou gave him to fashion a hammock that hung between the walls. A hammock he was still sleeping in.

Saber wondered what kept his large quills from tearing the fabric, then said, "Sonic?"

"Mm?"

"I'm sorry to wake you, but I wanted to tell that it is morning, and Shirou's friends will be here for breakfast," Saber explained, "And to remind you that you need to stay hidden. If ordinary people were to see you-"

Saber's dialogue was cut off as the decidedly-not-a-morning Hedgehog threw a pillow at her.

"I get it, can't leave my room, lemme *sleep!* "

Taiga and Sakura arrived, and in short order it was just another morning at the Emiya house.

For Sakura, this was bliss. Ever since her father gave her away, her life had been a roller coaster of physical abuse and emotional destruction. The only candle in the darkness she called her existence had been the tender kindness she received at Shirou's. While she suffered no delusions that he would be able to save her entirely from the cruelty of the Matou's, she treasured her moments with him. But deep down, she knew that it would only be a matter of time before her grandfather's horribly invasive worms would kill her, just as they had Uncle Kariya. However, in that kitchen, at that table,

she could always pretend that the horrors of Magecraft were far away, and that the Holy War waging outside was someone else's problem.

But as breakfast went on, she found it was much harder to pretend that day. She could sense, however faintly, extra presences in the house. She realized that somehow her senior had summoned a Servant of his own, or was allowing another Master to take refuge in his home. And then there was Avenger. The 'Servant' insisted on 'keeping an eye on her', and followed her to Shirou's. She managed to convince him (It?) to remain out of sight. Rather than dematerializing, the Servant just hid in her own shadow, a fitting place as he was so shadow like himself. Still, this didn't explain *why* Avenger had appeared...or how she could make him go away.

She did her best to ignore the tremblings as the Matou worms inside her reacted to the presences, so much that she almost didn't hear Taiga's words.

"-you hear? They actually know who's killing all of those people!" Taiga said between bites.

"Really?!" Shirou gasped, looking up from his rice.

"Mm-hmm, I overheard grandpa talking about it with some of his men," Taiga's grandfather, Fujimura Raiga, was the head of the city's *yakuza*. "In fact, it should be on now."

Taiga turned on the television, changing the channel to a news report.

"...And so police are now searching the city for anyone matching the description of a well-built adult man with blue hair and red eyes," The reporter said, "He is also said to be carrying a red spear of sorts, and wearing a dark blue jumpsuit..."

That's Lancer they're describing! Shirou thought, his mind whirling.

"And here's the weird part," Taiga added as the report went into sports, "From what I hear, the guy who saw the murderer also claims there was a tanuki there as well! Isn't that silly?"

"Yeah...silly." Shirou tried to keep his voice level, but on the inside he was nervous. Sonic had mentioned that the reason he fought Lancer was to save someone the Servant had tried to feed on. Obviously, that seemingly unimportant bystander had the good sense to alert the police after Sonic led Lancer away. Luckily, the man hadn't seen anything too outrageous so far...aside from the whole 'tanuki' thing. Shirou hoped that whoever was in charge of keeping magic secret would find a way to deal with that.

I can't deal with this , Kirie Kotomine thought as he watched the news report.

He had allowed Lancer to fight that strange animal mostly to get a good estimation of the Hedgehog's abilities, and to put an end to Lancer's endless whining about not being in combat. Well, they both got what they wanted, with interest. Luckily, Lancer hadn't been killed outright by the exploding sound barrier, and managed to limp back to the church, albeit with his hearing gone. And while it had been fun to watch Lancer shout "WHAT?!" every now and then, it overalled worried Kotomine about the direction of the War. More specifically, what directions *should* be taken to keep it secret. A random murder and people fainting left and right could be easily given mundane explanations. Sonic booms and tanukis, however...not even the 'reliable' gas leak excuse could brush those away. If the authorities got wind that something *highly unusual* was happening in Fuyuki, it would only mark the beginning of troubles that Kotomine, as officiator of the Holy War, would definitely become the center of. He prayed to God (He was a priest, after all) that Lancer's opponent would keep to himself and not draw anymore attention.

"You seem troubled."

Kotomine turned his head to regard the blond man walking up behind him. Handsome, dressed plain but stylishly, the only thing out of the ordinary about this man were his eyes, red as blood and sharp as a blade. He had been Kirie's tenet for ten years...a man who once held the title of Archer.

"I am simply trying to determine how this new development will affect the War." the priest said, gesturing to the news report playing on the television.

The once-Archer chuckled. "Ahh, you mean Lancer's opponent from last night. I was quite impressed to hear what had happened. To think a simple animal spirit could fight on equal grounds with a Servant. Still, it is of no threat to me."

Kotomine did not reply to that, and turned back to the TV. The reporter was now talking about the 'mysterious explosion' from last night. While his partner was perfectly justified in his sense of superiority, Kotomine knew that even an insect could bring down a mighty beast if it stung the right place and with strong enough venom.

This... *Hedgehog* (Was that term appropriate?), though possessing a devil may care attitude, was obviously no slouch in combat. It was easily Lancer's equal when it was playing around, *and* seemed to be immune to Noble Phantasms. Or maybe just blades in general. And the way it ended the fight...Kirie wasn't sure if his partner's golden armor could withstand a sonic boom.

As if sensing Kotomine's concerns, the Archer said, "If this troubles you so much, then why not have the Hound sniff it out? It will give him something to do while we wait for the War to close."

Kirie nodded slowly. "Yes...but it will have to be at night..." He smirked devilishly. "When his ears are done healing."

"WHAT?"

Kotomine grinned grew. It was still funny.

The peace of the Emiya estate was broken by a rush of wind and a blur racing from it an incredible velocity.

"I'M LATE!" Fujimura Taiga screamed as she barreled down the road. A large cloud of dust was kicked up as she went.

Shirou shook his head. Some things would never change, but he was grateful for the familiar sight in the face of all the events he had recently experienced. He and Sakura made quick work washing the dishes. Once they were done, it was time to get to school. Normally, Shirou would accompany Sakura, but today he needed to make breakfast for Saber and Sonic. Since he couldn't tell that to his *kohai*, Shirou just told Sakura that he wanted to clean up from a repair he was working on earlier, and that she should just go ahead without him. Though she was a bit sad to hear it, Sakura didn't argue and went on. As Shirou watched her departing back, he felt this odd twinge in his soul. Was it his imagination, or was Sakura's shadow...

"She's nice."

Shirou jumped. When did Sonic come from!?

Sonic looked up to give Shirou a smirk. "So, you two just seeing each other, or are you engaged?"

Shirou felt his cheeks warm slightly. "It's not like that. She's just a friend."

"Who comes by every day to make you food?" Sonic asked wily.

"Yes," Shirou didn't like what Sonic's smile was implying. "I think she's having problems with her own family, so I let her come here. And for your information, I don't always let her make dinner and breakfast. I prefer to do those myself."

Sensing the rising aggression on Shirou's voice, Sonic held up his hands in a defensive manner. "Whoa, chill, man. I was only teasing." As they went back towards the kitchen, Sonic said one last thing. "Though if you ask *me* , I think she wants to be more than friends."

Shirou paused briefly, then kept going. While it was tempting, there was no way Sakura would be interested in him like *that* ...and besides, going after your underclassman was wrong.

It didn't take long for a second breakfast to be made. Shirou didn't bother making anything fancy, and Sonic helped with the dishes. Once the table was set, Shirou turned and was about to leave when Saber spoke up.

"Shirou, I'll finish this in short time," She said, "I wouldn't want to make you late."

Confused, Shirou turned back to his Servant. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, that to protect you I'll be accompanying you to your school."

"What?!"

Sonic burst out laughing. When he saw the look Shirou gave him, he quickly buttoned up, but still had that cheeky grin. Saber, meanwhile, kept her expression stoic as she ate.

"Saber, I can't show up to school with a strange girl following me!" Shirou insisted, "It would attract too much attention!" Especially since he had just told Sakura to go without him. If he arrived at Homurahara Academy with a beautiful lady in tow, there would be no end to the rumors.

But Saber refused to back down. "That is a poor reason, Shirou," She said, "An enemy could attack you at any time there. It's important that I remain by your side to ensure your protection."

"No, it'll be fine," Shirou said, "The War is supposed to be secret, remember? No one will start a fight in broad daylight at a public place. Only Tohsakah- *san* , Lancer's Master, and Illya know I'm a Master, so it'll be easy for me to blend with a if I show up with a new friend- a foreigner, at that- another Master might decide to investigate and figure it out."

Judging from the obstinate frown forming on her otherwise flawless features, Shirou suspected that she wasn't going to accept his (In his eyes) perfect argument. He decided to pull out his trump card.

"There's another reason why I need you to stay here," Shirou took Saber aside so Sonic couldn't hear. "We told Sonic that he couldn't go out in public, but I think he's the kind of person who'd rather do what he wanted, regardless of the rules. You have to make sure he stays indoors. Can you do that for me?"

Saber glanced back at Sonic. The Hedgehog in question was casually flipping through the TV guide with a bored expression on his face. His eyes drifted towards hers, and he smirked. She couldn't deny what Shirou was saying, as in heart she held the same suspicions about Sonic's character herself. But she was still apprehensive of leaving Shirou. The encounter with Berserker had made her suspect her Master had a deep-rooted suicidal complex.

"Listen, I promise that I'll be home before dark," Shirou went on, "Just try to keep Sonic hidden until then."

Saber sighed. "Very well. However, you must promise me that if you do run into trouble, to summon me at once with a Command Seal."

Shirou glanced at the marks on his hand. "I thought these were only used to give you orders."

"They are 'Absolute Orders', Shirou," Saber explained, "If you ordered me to appear at your side, their power would summon me in an instant."

Shirou nodded. "I see. But don't I only have three of these Absolute Orders?"

"Exactly," Saber affirmed, "That is why I will allow this just once. But you must still be careful. Do not allow yourself to stand out from a crowd. As you said, it is unlikely that another Master or Servant will attack in view of others, but there are many unpredictable fools in the world."

Shirou gave his Servant a reassuring smile. "I'll be fine, Saber. What's the worst that could happen?"

Saber wasn't as confident as Shirou was, and her expression showed it. Nonetheless, she only watched as her Master left the house. There was a rush of wind and Sonic was at her side, also watching Shirou's departing back.

"Dude's in a magic gang war and said something like *that* ," the Hedgehog commented, "You worried?"

"More than you could possibly imagine."

At Homurahara Academy, crowds of students ran, trying to get to whatever class they had been assigned to on time. Tohsaka Rin was *not* one of these students. The Head of the (Incredibly singular) Tohsaka Clan would never debase herself by being late to class. She had gotten up early, not that she had been able to sleep much to begin with. The sheer shock of what had happened last night kept her up. Not just that creature that had fought Lancer, but also the *kitsune* that had crashed an airplane into her backyard.

Kitsune. She thought that animal spirits had vanished from the world long ago (Archer claimed that somewhere in the city there was a restaurant run by cat spirits, but couldn't give the exact address- he was probably joking), and that the only way anyone would meet a *kitsune* would be to summon Tamamo-no-Mae as a Servant. After taking the furry test pilot into her mansion and treating his wounds,

she had interrogated the *kitsune* fiercely. What she learned about him was a nonsensical story about fighting killer robots from another dimension. Obviously, it was a lie, she had decided, a cover story to hide his true origins. *Kitsune* were infamous for being tricksters, after all. Still, it was a bit demeaning that he didn't come up with something a bit more plausible. Travel between worlds was one of the True Magics. There was no way a machine could pull it off, even with some...enchanted gemstones (What did he call it? 'Chaos Jewels', or something?) jammed into it. Technology couldn't handle the power of jewel Magecraft, that was a fact.

Rin was pulled out of her reverie when she saw a familiar face. Matou Sakura was walking towards the school building, and when the eyes of the two girls met, a subtle tension took hold. Sakura looked a bit more downcast, while Rin's face became like stone.

"Good morning, Matou- *san* ," Rin greeted, unflinching.

"Um...Good morning, Tohsaka- *sempai* ," Sakura returned, averting her eyes.

And with that, Sakura moved on. Rin watched her go, and felt a twinge in her soul.

Exchanges like that were all that was to tell about the relationship between the two students. Once they had been close, many years ago, but now, an emotional wall existed between them. Deep down, it hurt Rin that such a wall existed. But she had long ago decided that the only way to deal with the pain was by putting another wall around her own heart. For years, it worked quite well, allowing Rin to focus on her own Magecraft training. But as she would learn in time, such a tactic caused certain important factors to slip past her.

But Emiya Shirou did not. She saw him running up towards the school from one of the windows. She also saw that Saber was not with him.

Did that idiot really come alone? She thought, stunned. Doesn't he realize that a Master out in the open without a Servant is basically a target waiting for a bulls-eye?

Rin then realized that Archer had said the same thing when she instructed him to stay at the mansion and keep an eye on their fluffy houseguest. This made her even more upset, as she realized that she was acting as stupid as Shirou was. She was then tempted- *sorely* tempted- to go confront Shirou and give him a dressing-down, mostly to vent her own feelings of confusion, anger and a slew of other emotions building up behind her inner wall. But she also knew that acting differently around Shirou would arouse suspicion. She would have to be subtle.

Later that day, Shirou passed her on the way to class.

"Tohsaka, I've got something to tell you," He began, "It's about what we saw last night-"

He stopped. Tohsaka Rin had just given him a glare so hot it seemed like his head would explode. He realized later that there was a very good chance Rin could actually do that and became quite scared.

"We'll talk later." She said quietly.

Shirou watched her go. He wondered if he had done something wrong.

"Is something wrong?" Archer asked.

After Rin left, the little *kitsune*, who called himself Tails, had resumed repairs on his plane. Archer was sorely tempted to help- how often did you get to fix a advanced bi-plane?- he knew he had to keep a look out and not get distracted. While the Tohsaka mansion and grounds were protected by a boundary field, a strong enough enemy could penetrate it.

Tails sighed. "The damage to the *Tornado* is a lot worse than I thought. Several pieces of the outer hull broke off. Plus, the engine is pretty messed up, too. I could patch it up, but there's no telling how long it'll last when the plane takes off. To fix everything, I need parts."

"You're not going to find them here, I can tell you that much," Archer said, "The Tohsaka family has always been...old-fashioned. And Rin is determined to hold up their traditions, no matter how backwards they are. The exclusion of technology is one of them."

"Yeah, I guessed that much," Tails nodded, "I didn't see any electronics in the house...not even a phone or TV."

Tails put away the wrench he had been holding and sat on the grass. Archer could see that he was despondent. And it was clear to see why. Tails was worried about his friends, but couldn't go out to look for them until night. Most likely he hoped to distract himself by working on his plane. Now that plan was gone.

"Let's go inside," Archer said, "If you can't fix your plane, then there's no reason to stay out. Nobody comes here, but we can't take that chance of anyone seeing you. And don't worry about your friends. If they're smart, they'll stay hidden as well."

"Knuckles and Amy, maybe," Tails admitted, and fished something from the cockpit of his ruined plane. "But Sonic's never been the subtle type. I bet he's already made the news."

I hope not, Archer thought, Rin's already stressed from disbelieving Tails' story. If an animal-person starts appearing in public, she might have a breakdown. And as amusing as that would have been for Archer, the long-term consequences would be catastrophic. If the Mages Association got wind of events that could expose the existence of Magecraft were happening in Fuyuki, they would start taking action. Genocidal action. His foster-father had once told him of the time when enforcers from the Association wiped out an entire village in response to an outbreak of vampirism. Rather than trying to

help the people, they chose to just kill everyone, as easily as you would exterminate a bugs hive to stop an infestation.

I can only pray the situation doesn't degrade to that point...

When Bazett woke up, she was confused. And sleepy. But mostly confused. Her last coherent memory was getting her arm cut off and being left for dead in a dark alley. She had tried to heal the wound as best she could, but her best only delayed the inevitable- she was a combatant, not a medic, and had lost too much blood. She had only enough strength to wait for death. Her thoughts became a blur after that, unable to keep track of how time was passing...until she felt a hot jolt through her body, after which darkness claimed her.

But now she had returned to the light. At first, she thought she was in heaven, but the IVs connect to one of her arms disabused her of that notion.

Arms!

Bazett then realized that she had two arms again; the one that had been cut off grew back. But how? Regenerating flesh was a skill that went beyond what an enforcer would know. It would take an enormous amount of Mana to tap into.

Thinking back, Bazett realized that the 'hot jolt' she felt earlier must have been an influx of Mana. But where did it come from? The leylines of Fuyuki didn't have that much power, and they were being used for the Holy Grail War. Was this the work of another Servant or Master...and if so, why?

"Miss McRemitz?"

Bazett was pulled from her musings by a male voice. She saw an adult man in a white coat- a doctor, no doubt- walking into her room. He carried a clipboard in his hands.

"I'm glad to see you've woken up," He said, "We were worried you wouldn't make it."

"Thank you for your concern." Bazett replied, and a thought occurred to her. "Could you please tell me where I am?"

"You're in the Fuyuki General Hospital, Ms. McRemitz. My name is Doctor Twice Pierceman" the doctor said, "You were brought in by..." He trailed off, looking uncomfortable. "Well, we'll go into that a bit later. I have a few concerns about your condition that need to be addressed."

He didn't want to talk about who brought her here? That was troubling. Bazett assumed that a bystander had found her and brought her. Another thought occurred to her. Did this happen before or after she regrew her arm?

"When you were brought in, you had lost over a liter of blood," Dr. Pierceman said, checking his clipboard. "2.1 liters, to be precise. Quite frankly, it's a miracle you lived long enough for us to do the transfusion. Oddly enough, we couldn't figure out how you suffered that much blood loss. You didn't have any wounds large enough to cause that- just superficial cuts and..." It was at this point that Pierceman's eyes glazed over.

"There is nothing abnormal about my condition," Bazett told him, trying to ignore the slight headache that was forming. Doing hypnosis right after dying was pushing things, but she still had duty as a Mage Association Enforcer to ensure the secrecy of Magecraft.

"...Yes, of course," Pierceman replied, writing something on his clipboard. "Now, about your friend..."

Friend? I don't have any friends in this city . Bazett thought. The only people she knew in Fuyuki who would have *any* care for her condition were Kirie Kotomine, and her Servant, Lancer. Just thinking about those two filled Bazett with equal parts anger and sorrow. But mostly anger. It was Kotomine who had attacked her,

stealing the Command Seals that bound Lancer to her. Of that, she was sure. And she was equally sure that getting them back would be a sadistic pleasure.

And while Bazett stewed in her rage, Dr. Pierceman continued. "... We've kept her in a private room to avoid scaring the other patients, and I've asked the staff members that have seen her not to say anything, but I...I just don't know what to think."

"What are you talking about?" Bazett asked, confused by the doctor's awkward tone of voice. Was it a Dead Apostle that brought her in?

Pierceman sighed, and gestured towards the door. A small figure soon appeared at the door way. It was probably less than half of Bazett's total height. It wore a red short dress, boots, white gloves, and a hairband, and therefore was female, probably. Bazett wasn't sure what to think of her apparent benefactor, only that it's appearance was comparable to those cat spirits that ran a cafe she once stopped at before summoning Lancer.

When Amy Rose saw Bazett sitting upright in her bed, she smiled, sighing with relief. "Oh, good, you're all right."

"Are you the one who brought me here?" Bazett asked, trying to absorb what was happening. This was a bit much to take in. Was this...cartoon character the reason she escaped death's clutches?

"Yes," Amy replied, walking over to the Irishwoman's bed. "I found you in some alley last night. My name is Amy Rose, and yours is... Buzzy?"

"Bazett," The Enforcer corrected. And, because it was pressing on her mind, she asked, "Did anyone else see you last night?"

"I don't think so..." Amy muttered, looking confused. "Why? Is that a problem? Dr. Pierceman said the same thing..."

That reminded Bazett. She looked over and sent the good doctor another hypnotic suggestion. "Please send everyone who saw her... no, send in the hospital's staff, one at a time." She'd have to hypnotize the entire hospital to ignore Amy's appearance. Better safe than sorry, after all.

Dr. Pierceman nodded, his eyes once again glazed over, and left. Once the door shut behind him, Amy gave Bazett a strange look.

"What was *that* about?" the pink hedgehog asked.

Bazett sighed. "Miss Rose...Amy, I think we need to have a talk."

Saber sat at the table in the Emiya house living room. In another life, she would have taken this 'leisure time' to sleep in her room to better recharge her Mana. However the need to chaperone Sonic required her to be awake. She had no doubt that Sonic would 'fly the coop' if his watcher was napping. Off to the side, Sonic was watching the television, lying on his side with his head propped up by an arm as he lazily changed channels with the remote.

"Boring...boring...boring..." Sonic muttered, before laying his head on the floor. After a moment, he got up and zipped out of the room.

Luckily, Saber's senses were so honed that she did not need to follow after him. She could still sense his presence within the grounds. Judging by the sound of his footprints, it seemed like he was going towards the storage house.

That made Saber remember Irisviel, her friend during the Fourth Holy War. She had always been full of cheer. When they first arrived in Japan, she had been so excited to arrive in the country...and had been just as glad to arrive at this very house. It was always something of a puzzle to Saber; how could someone so warm and uplifting fall in love with a Mage as cold and broken as Kiritsugi?

And for that matter, what would Iri have thought of Shirou? Would the two idealists bond?

Saber was pulled out of these thoughts by the sound of footsteps; Sonic had returned, and held something in his arms. In a heartbeat he was by the TV set, now connecting wires. He turned around and held up some sort of black device for Saber to see.

"I found this in that shed outside," He explained, "I can't believe Shirou has a Sega Genesis! Haven't seen one of these things in years..."

Oh, a video game console. Saber knew of these things, thanks to the knowledge the Holy Grail gave its Servants on the era they were summoned in.

"There were even some games, too!" Sonic went on, zipping out and back with a box. He pulled out several cartridges. "Lessee... *Clayfighters* , *Vectorman* , *Acro* ...ooh, *Altered Beasts* !"

Sonic put the cartridge in the console and turned everything on. In a second, the TV blared "SAY-GAH!" as a familiar (To Sonic) blue logo appeared, followed by the game's title screen. It wasn't long before the Hedgehog was immersed in the game, and the room was filled with digital sound bytes.

Aside from the noise, Saber found this most satisfying. If Sonic was focused on the game, he wouldn't be so eager to break curfew. She could focus more on regenerating her Mana and healing from the skirmish with Lancer and Berserker. But even with that in mind, the knight's eyes began to drift towards the screen...

Hours later, Saber died. Again.

Sonic shook his head sadly as the game's countdown appeared not he screen. "You're just not getting the hang of this. That's what, the fifth time the boss beat you?"

Saber grimaced as she hit the start button on her controller. "I am starting to figure out its tactics, however. I am confident that this next battle shall end in my favor."

"Yeah, that's good to know," Sonic replied, and reached over for the controller. "But it's my turn, and...Wait, what time is it?"

Saber's attention was pulled away from the screen. Looking out the window, she saw that the sun was setting. She couldn't believe it. Where had the time gone? Had she become so immersed in the video game that her very senses took leave?

"Almost night," Sonic grinned, and stood up. Stretching his arms, he said, "Time to hit the town!"

Oh, that's right. They agreed to let Sonic out once it became dark. Then Saber's eyes began to water, and she realized that she hadn't blinked in over two hours. Thinking that maybe she had spent too much time on the game, she turned the power button on the Genesis console.

"A flying saucer was sighted entering the city from the docks as of..." A newswoman was saying.

Sonic and Saber looked at the TV quickly. A blurred image of something red and spinning appeared on the screen.

"...All attempts to communicate with the vessel have yielded no results. Authorities advise that all citizens remain indoors and off the streets. If anyone has any information, please call..."

Sonic glanced at Saber. "Do you guys have flying saucers in this world?"

Saber shook her head, not losing sight of the screen.

Sonic snapped his fingers. "Then it didn't take Eggman long to get settled. That's probably one of his robots."

Saber suddenly felt a sense of urgency. Standing up, she said, "I have to get to Shirou. He might not know about this." And knowing him, he would gladly run towards the danger this possible robot created.

"Well, it's kinda late," Sonic noted, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "He must still be at the school."

"Then that is where I must go." Saber declared, standing up. There was a flash, and her armor-dress combo appeared around her body. There was no telling when a battle would begin, and the second required to transform could be costly.

"Nice effect," Sonic grinned, and held out his hand. "Need a lift, little lady?"

Saber looked at Sonic. "What?"

"I'll take you to Shirou before taking down that robot," Sonic explained, "With my speed, we should be there in a few minutes."

"That will not be necessary," Saber rebuffed proudly, and marched towards the door. "My own speed is not to be underestimated. By taking the rooftops, I can arrive at Shirou's school in short order."

"But do you know where it is?" Sonic asked, following her.

Saber stopped. Come to think of it, Shirou never mentioned what route he took to his school.

"When I was leading Lancer out of the city, we passed someplace called Homurahara Academy," Sonic went on, "I could be wrong, but one of those two ladies from breakfast mentioned it...the loud one, I think."

By this time the two heroes were outside. An outside observer would have found the pair quite comical to look at; One was a young girl clad in a blue dress with armor. The other was a spiky-headed

animal person who came up to her chest- in sneakers. The girl had a look of freshly-forged steel in her eyes; hard but blazing. The hedgehog's eyes were more bouncy and light, like rubber with glitter glued on. To an outsider, they did not look like the heroes of legend they claimed to be. These would probably be more at home in an anime, or fan fiction.

(The author would like to apologize for getting kinda meta on you.)

Saber considered her options. One was to go off on her own, and hope that whatever random direction she chose was one that had Shirou at the end of. The other was to rely on directions provided by a fellow freeloader who claimed to be a castaway from another realm. While neither were better than the other, the latter option had the advantage of letting her keep watch over Sonic for just a little bit longer.

"Very well," Saber nodded, closing her eyes. "I'll follow from the rooftops. Stick to the shadows to avoid being seen, I'll track you by your-"

The Heroic Spirit didn't get a chance to finish as Sonic, within a second, scooped her up and took off down the streets. The Hedgehog later commented that, even with armor, Saber wasn't very hard to lift. Fortunately, no one saw the two of them making their way towards Homurahara Academy. What few eyewitnesses saw was some sort of blue blur passing by, followed by the shrieks of an invisible young girl. Fortunately for Kotomine, sights like that were easier to blame on gas leaks.

Because the Tohsaka Mansion didn't have a television, Archer and Tails didn't hear know about a possible robot attack. Nonetheless, Archer was still worried about his Master, who was still alone and unprotected at school. Technically, Shirou was with her, but it was more likely that he would need *her* protection.

The problem was that he was under orders to stay and keep watch over Tails. And while Archers possessed an 'Independent Action' skill that allowed them to move outside of their Master's wishes, the Heroic Spirit wasn't sure he wanted to antagonize Rin so early in the war.

"Um, Archer?"

Archer was pulled out of his thoughts and looked down. Tails was walking up to, clutching some sort of small computer under his arm.

"It's getting dark out," The fox said, "I wanted to let you know that I'm going to look for my friends."

Uh-oh. This was a problem. While he and Rin had said that Tails could go out at night, the actual plan had been to hypnotize the fox with Rin's magecraft once she got home. Unfortunately, she had decided to stay after school because "Shirou had something to tell her". He wondered what could be so important that she would jeopardize her own plans.

Then again...maybe they *weren't* jeopardized. Putting on a friendly smile, Archer said, "All right. I'm planning to go out myself."

"Why?"

"I'm worried about Rin. She hasn't come back from school yet," Archer explained, "There have been reports of a serial killer on the loose- and I hear he likes young girls."

(In the Fuyuki Church, Lancer sneezed)

"Oh my gosh!" Tails cried, his namesake sticking out in shock. "And Rin's out there on her own?! We have to find her!"

"Your friends are probably in just as much danger as Rin is," Archer pointed out.

Tails shrugged the bowman off. "Aw, don't worry about them. Between Sonic's speed, Knuckles' fists, and Amy's hammer, I feel sorry for any weirdo who tries to get the drop on 'em."

Too bad you don't know about Servants or Magecraft, kid. Archer thought as he and Tails left the mansion grounds. Ordinarily, he would have gone into his astral form to avoid being seen. But, now with Tails in tow he had to keep solid so he can help hide him from any civilians they could passed.

As they went on, Archer couldn't help but be drawn to the device Tails carried with him. Every now and then Tails would turn it on and fiddle with its buttons.

"What's that for?" the bowman asked, genuinely interested.

"Oh, this is my Miles Electric," Tails explained, and held up the screen to Archer's face. It showed some sort of green grid against a black background, with blinking yellow dots here and there. "It's basically a multi-purpose computer I made. I've been trying to convert it into an Chaos Emerald locator."

"Those gems that sent you here?" Archer recalled how eager Rin had looked when Tails mentioned them. Regardless of her skepticism in the rest of the fox boy's story, she apparently was quite hopeful *that* part was true. No doubt a method of gaining ultimate power a bit more easily than taking part in the Holy War appealed to the Mage within her.

"Yeah, we're going to need them if we want to get home," Tails explained, "I altered the GPS on the ME so it can pick up unknown energy signatures by receiving their electromagnetic-psychokenetic pulse."

While Archer knew what all those words meant, when put together in that specific order they only made him confused. The part about unknown energy signatures also made him nervous, though he didn't show it.

"Huh, that's weird..." Tails eyes narrowed as he studied the screen. He tapped the controls.

"What's wrong?" Archer asked, bending down.

"According to this, there's a high energy signature right on top of us- *and* following us." Tails murmured, and looked around. "Do you see anything like that?"

Archer looked around. While his own senses weren't quite as keen as a Caster's, he felt they were good enough to pick up the presence of a jewel capable of the Second True Magic. But there was nothing like that around.

"Maybe your machine is malfunctioning." Archer suggested, and moved on.

"Maybe..." Tails considered, still fiddling with his computer as he walked. "Come to think of it, it was picking up this weird energy field around your house- nothing major, just...odd, that it was there. Maybe it did something to the sensors..."

A field? The only kind of power surrounding Rin's place is the boundary field she keeps up to protect it, Archer thought as Tails mused over his machine. But no computer could detect that- otherwise mages everywhere would be overwhelmed by government agents with geiger counters, He recalled Tails' earlier claims, and how advanced the Tornado seemed. No computer...on Earth ...

School was out at Homurahara Academy. The place was almost empty now, save for a few individuals, staying late to finish up some work. These people were far and few between now, as the recent wave of mysterious gave them the impetus to be home before dark.

One of the few to lack this impetus was Shirou, helping clean up the school archery club as a favor to the club president, Mitsuzuri Ayako. He hadn't really intended to do it (In fact, he had forgotten

completely), but found himself being pressed during a discussion with her and his friend and student president, Issei Ryuudou. He learned that Shinji, following a rejection from Tohsaka, had skipped school. Speaking of relationships, it turned out that another teacher, Kuzuki Souchiro, was getting married, and his bride-to-be was staying at the temple.

But the most pressing concern was Sakura. According to Ayako, his underclassman had been acting unnaturally anxious all day, jumping at shadows and such. While it was possible the mysterious attacks had set her on the edge, this new attitude, coupled with Shinji's absence, made Shirou wonder if something was happening at the Matou Manor.

As he was exiting the archery club's door, he found himself confronted by none other than Rin. She had a mean look in her eye, though it was much cooler than the red-hot glare of sudden death she wore at the beginning of the day.

"Tohsaka, you're still here?" He asked, shutting the door behind him.

"Obviously," Rin replied, annoyed. "Emiya- *kun* , do you realize how stupid you are?"

"What do you mean?"

"I *mean* , coming out alone in the open during the Holy War!" Rin was almost yelling, but managed to keep her voice down. "Don't you realize that a Master without his Servant might as well be called a target?"

"But, Tohsaka, the War's supposed to be secret, remember?" Shirou answered, "No Master is going to start anything while there are other people around."

Rin gave him a flat look. "And tell me, do you see any other people around?"

It then dawned on Shirou that, aside from the two of them and some few scattered around the school, Homurahara Academy was empty. He suddenly felt very stupid. And fearful. But mostly stupid.

Rin sighed. "You are so lucky we've already made an alliance. If not, I'd be filling you with *Gandr* shots right now."

"Um...thank you for not doing that." Shirou replied awkwardly, and looked around. "Does that mean Archer is here too, in astral form?"

"Erm, actually, I had to leave him home," Rin looked away, her cheeks turning a faint shade of red.

Shirou raised an eyebrow. "Is that right? You must be awfully confident in yourself to go out alone."

Shirou's words must have struck a nerve, as Rin shot him a very mean glare. "That's besides the point! Anyway, what did you want to talk about? At the beginning of the day, you said something about what happened last night."

Shirou nodded, and quickly filled her in everything he knew about Sonic. However, he purposely left out telling the Hedgehog about the Holy Grail. Rin was annoyed at him enough as it was, he'd have to wait until she cooled off before dropping *that* bombshell. Of course, part of him was pleased to see how stunned Rin looked as she absorbed his words.

Rin's probably amazed to learn about creatures from another world, the Master of Saber assumed mentally, Maybe she's jealous that I found one first.

Rin, meanwhile, was thinking, *I can't believe Shirou found another one! Oh, well, that makes it a bit easier. With two of them captured, we might be able to keep this "'Tanuki" thing from getting out of hand.* "Is that why you left Saber at your house?"

"Yeah, you heard the rumors people are saying about a tanuki," Shirou explained, "If Sonic went out into public, we'd never hear the end of it."

"Well, that was surprisingly good thinking on your part," Rin stated, "I guess even idiots can do well if they try."

"...For a complement, that hurt, Tohsaka." Shirou deadpanned.

Brushing him off, Rin said, "Listen, Shirou. Last night, Archer and I captured a *kitsune* in sneakers outside my house."

"How many tails did he have?" Shirou asked thoughtfully.

"Just two."

"That sounds like Tails," Shirou remarked, more to himself. "Well, Sonic will be happy to find one of his friends so quickly."

"We're not going to let them meet."

"What are you saying?"

Rin looked stern. "The *kitsune* had the same ridiculous 'From another world' story your new friend gave. I don't buy it. We have no proof that *anything* we've been told is true. Transported by an exploding machine powered by gemstones? More likely they're familiars summoned by another Master, or, more likely, this War's Caster."

Shirou was silent. He hadn't considered that possibility. But he had never heard of a familiar that could exhibit the amount of personality Sonic had. From what Kiritsugi had told him, most familiars were just extensions of their mages will, and generally acted as their eyes and ears.

"I've got Archer watching the *ktisune*, and Saber's got the hedgehog corralled," Rin continued, "But we can't have them playing babysitter forever, not if we want to win this War."

"It sounds like you've already got a plan." Shirou noted.

"It's a long shot, but I'm hoping we can put them under my control," Rin explained, "I didn't have time to really do anything to Tails this morning, but if nothing else happens, I can do it tonight. But right now, I think we should take care of Sonic first. If this works, we'll have a new weapon to use against the other Masters."

"I think we'd already had a new *ally* ," Shirou said uneasily. He didn't like how quickly Rin had brought up the usage of mind control. "Sonic said he was fighting Lancer last night to save someone from being killed. Didn't you hear the news report?"

"Yes, I heard the story in between classes" Rin admitted, "But anyway, that's another reason we need to keep these guys on a short leash. We can't have them running wild and exposing magecraft."

Shirou sighed. He had a feeling that Rin wasn't going to let up on this idea easily. "...All right. I'll take you to see Sonic. Just let me find a phone, first."

"A phone? What for?"

"I need to call my house," Shirou explained as he and Rin started to walk down the hall. "I told Sonic he could go out and look for his friends at night, but now I have to tell Saber to keep him at home a little longer."

As they went, Shirou mulled over why Tohsaka was so adamant about not accepting Sonic's story. Was it that hard to believe? Granted, the phenomenon Sonic described sounded impossible, but just last night several 'impossible' things happened. He recalled his father's words on other mages. According to Kiritsugi, mages from old families tended to be rigid, and opposed to new ideas and concepts. Was that the reason?

Shirou was pulled out of his thoughts when he heard Rin gasp. Coming back into reality, he saw a girl lying on the floor. Forgetting about Sonic for the moment, the two Masters rushed to the girl's aid.

"Is she all right?" Shirou asked, worried. He recognized the girl as a new member of the archery club.

"No! She's had her mana drained!" Rin replied. She sounded angry, but Shirou "She's not dead yet, but that'll change if I don't help her!"

As Rin got to work, Shirou looked around, trying to find a trace of the girl's attacker. A leg disappearing around a corner, the sound of a door closing, even a window that was conspicuously open. None of these things were in sight, however, making Shirou even more anxious.

"Okay, I've got her stabilized," Rin announced, and looked around. "There must be another Servant here," She felt her Command Seals go warm. "And they're close!"

Shirou's eyes widened and did another look around. He was worried, but also confused. His own Command Seals weren't glowing...

"SHIROU!" Saber yelled, appearing out from nowhere.

Both Masters jumped in alarm. To her credit, Rin already had another jewel loaded with *gandr* poised on the tip of her finger, her entire arm tense, but steady. When she saw who it was, the Tohsaka Mage lowered her hand.

"Saber?" Shirou asked, trying to calm his beating heart. "W-what are you doing here?"

"We need to get you home." Saber said. Was it Shirou's imagination, or did she seem frazzled about something. Did she know what was going on?

"Sonic and I saw a news report about a flying saucer of some kind entering the city. He identified it as one of the robots he typically fights," Saber explained, "We came here to ascertain your well-being."

"A robot? In Fuyuki?" Shirou tried to keep up, but everything was happening too quickly for him to process. "And- *Sonic's here?* "

"Yes, he went off to search another part of the school," Saber answered, "He ran off before I could stop him and said to meet back at the entrance."

"Wait a minute!" Rin shouted, trying make heads or tails of the situation. "You let him out in public!?"

Saber looked to Rin. "I did. The situation demanded a bit of recklessness. Don't worry, I do not believe anyone could see us at the speeds we were moving."

Yeah, because a blue blur moving at the speed of sound is totally inconspicuous. Shirou thought, trying to stave off the throbbing in his head. "Well, at least he has the right idea...just as long as he doesn't make any noise." He could only hope.

But the world could care less about the hopes of an amateur mage, as a distant crashing told him. With Saber in the lead, the three took off down the hall, hoping to find the source of cacophony. As they ran, Rin sent a telepathic message to Archer to get over here *right now* before something else happened.

(Several minutes ago...)

Ayako squirmed, trying to get away, but it was useless. She wanted to call for help, but the grip she was in was so tight that she could barely breath.

Her attacker was a beautiful young woman wore a black, almost sensual outfit that clung to her curves. She had light purple hair so long that it hung down at her knees, and her eyes were hidden by a black eye cover. Were it not for the pain she was in, and the knowledge that her life was in danger, Ayako would have been turned on.

" Sshhh... " The lady in black whispered, and Ayako was horrified to learn that from this woman even a simple shushing sounded like an invitation to bed. "Don't struggle. It will all be over soon..."

Ayako's blood went cold. This was the end, she was sure. She tensed, the antipation paralyzing her. But before anything could happen, the situation changed so quickly that Ayako became dizzy. In the distance she fairly heard a whirring noise. Then, a gust of wind blew as *something* zipped past her. The woman's hold was gone, and Ayako fell into someone else's arms.

"You okay?" Her saviour asked, helping Ayako up.

"Y-yeah," Ayako said uneasily as she stood. "Thank-"

Ayako stopped. No one was there. Looking down, she saw a spiny blue animal-person in red sneakers. He grinned, and then looked past her. Ayako turned and saw the mystery woman getting up. Even with her eyes covered, Ayako could tell she was not pleased.

"You better get outta here," The animal-guy said, "Ms. No-Personal-Space over there still looks clingy."

"R-right," Ayako murmured, and, taking a moment to look back at the strange scene she was leaving, began to run. *I was just saved by a mascot character!*

Sonic watched Ayako go before turning back his new opponent. He pointed at her. "I don't suppose anyone's told you that it's no good to touch someone like that?"

As a reply, the strange woman threw something at Sonic. The Hedgehog ducked, and saw that it was a metal spike attached to some kind of chain, accompanied by a strange sound like snakes slithering. Rather than dwelling on it, Sonic curled up and began to spin in place- his Spin Dash- and built up speed for about a second. The blinded woman wasn't sure what to make of it- to her ears, it sounded like Sonic had transformed himself into an engine. Sonic shot forward, moving like a cannon ball across the floor. The lady in black leaping up towards the ceiling, just narrowly avoiding the Hedgehog's attack. She threw another spike, but Sonic was also on the move, hopping to the side and bouncing off the wall towards the woman. She held up a chain just in time to block the assault, and was internally stunned to hear a grinding noise and sparks giving off as Sonic's spinning body hit the links. Were she aware of Sonic's reputation, she would have been pleased with herself; this was the same attack Sonic used to bring down many of Eggman's robots.

Sonic separated from the chain and the two landed on the floor. He rubbed the space under his nose thoughtfully as he regarded his foe in a new light. She, meanwhile, was wondering how many of the few people left in the school had heard the sparks fly.

"That's one tough chain," Sonic commented, "I'm guessing you're no ordinary girl. Don't tell me...you're Assassin, right?"

"Rider." The Servant answered.

Sonic shrugged. "Eh, close enough. I'm Sonic the Hedgehog," he quickly entered a semi-crouched pose, ready for anything. "So, mind telling me who you used to be? Or are you gonna make me guess?"

"Why spoil the surprise?" Rider asked, materializing another set of chains with a spike at the end. "And just what are you supposed to be? Another Servant?"

"I'm nobody's servant," Sonic replied, "And my legend is bit more *recent!* "

Sonic dashed forward. Rather than throwing her spike at Sonic, Rider kept it at her side, ready and waiting. The Hedgehog was about an inch from Rider's stomach when he suddenly shot into the air, just narrowly avoiding Rider's attempt to impale him. He ricocheted off of the ceiling and came down at the purple-haired Servant, who once more brought up her chain to block his attack. He legs buckled, but not from the force of Sonic's blow. Rather, she bent down in hopes of using her momentum to steer Sonic towards the wall, once she pushed him off, she swung her leg at the Hedgehog, only to miss as Sonic slid under her and made a go at her back. She whirled around just in time to block him again, and this time wrapped her chains around his legs, keeping Sonic from bouncing away. She then prepared to stab Sonic, only for the Blue Blur to retaliate by delivering several super-fast punches to her face. Rider was knocked back, letting go of Sonic. The two were instantly on their feet and sizing each other up.

I'm at a disadvantage, Rider realized, this creature is too small and quick fight effectively. And in this small hallway I cannot maneuver well. If only I could take this fight outside...

Sonic, meanwhile, thought. *She's one tough bird. Those chains are stronger than whatever Eggman builds his robots with. I need to take this fight outside so I can really cut loose and do some damage.*

There was a tense pause as both combatants considered their next move. Although the lull lasted seconds, to their minds it went on for an hour. Time in the mindscape slowed the rate of time to a crawl as options were weighed.

No...even if I get more room to move, this Hedgehog's speed surpasses mine, Rider decided, I need to slow him down.

As Rider prepared another chain, an idea came to Sonic. *That's it! She's good enough to dodge, so I won't even aim! Next time, I'll just grab that chain and drag her out!*

Sonic began to Spin Dash. As he built up speed, Rider prepared her counterattack- Sonic's attacks were basic enough, but that wasn't the problem. She knew that it wouldn't be long until their conflict attracted other people- or worse, other Masters. The Tohsaka girl her current Master tried to hit on was definitely a Master, and still in the school. If she witnessed the fight, she might glean information from the struggle to come up with a counter for Rider's abilities.

That's when an idea came to Rider. Smirking, she raised her hand towards her blindfold. The reason she kept her eyes hidden wasn't because of any disability. Rather, her eyes worked *too* well. Anyone within her vision would become stone, unless they possessed a strong enough mystical defense. But even then, the power may stun them long enough for a killing blow.

Rider's blind fell at the same time Sonic moved. While the Power Rings were an excellent defense against physical attacks, status effects were a different matter. Rider's gamble worked, and Sonic became stone. But the laws of inertia are not so easily dismissed, even with magic. The Hedgehog's body had indeed transformed, but he was still in motion when that transformation occurred. Rider had assumed petrification would act as an emergency brake, and thus was unprepared for the rolling ball of spiny rock coming at her.

CRASH!

Sonic's petrified body struck Rider's stomach with enough force to send them both through the wall. Tumbling in the air, Rider forced Sonic's stone form off of her to avoid being squished under it, and the two landed in two inelegant heaps in the school's yard. With her sight broken, Sonic's body went back to normal.

"Uhghghh...What happened?" Sonic muttered, getting up. "How'd I freeze up like that...?"

Rider leapt to her feet, angry but confused. Putting her blindfold back on, she considered making a grand escape; They were outside now, and Sonic seemed to be immune to Noble Phantasms. Though night

hadn't fallen just yet, it was still dark enough to use Bellerophon Bridle to summon a flying beast to take her away. No matter how fast Sonic was, it didn't seem like he was capable of flight.

The sound of a blade rushing through the air caught Rider's thoughts, and she leapt away, just narrowly being bisected by Saber's invisible sword. Flipping onto her feet, Rider positioned herself equal distance between the other Servant and Sonic.

"Are you all right, Sonic?!" Saber asked, keeping her vision locked onto the woman in black.

"Saber... Yeah, I'm fine!" Sonic called back, "How's your man doing?"

"My Master is well, thank you!" Saber replied, "Now, please excuse me while I tend to business!"

Saber rushed at Rider, and two engaged in combat, sword meeting chain. Rider's lithe, nubile body looked almost heavenly as she did her best to dodge and parry Saber's powerful blows. As they dueled, Sonic took a moment to catch his breath. He looked around and saw two figures watching the scene from another window in the school. By the taller one's red hair he assumed it was Shirou, accompanied by a different student. He gave the two a mock salute and his attention returned to the fighting Servants. Sonic prepared himself to jump in at the next possible opportunity. However, as the skies darkened, a faint humming reached his ears...

"So, there *was* another Servant here." Shirou murmured, watching his own Servant fight the new one. His eyes drifted towards the blue figure on the grass. "And there's Sonic." *I wish he wouldn't stand out in public like that. What if someone sees him?*

Next to Shirou, Rin had her eyes closed, and was muttering something under her breath. The red-haired mage felt a ripple of power as his classmate finished her words.

"There, the Boundary Field is complete," Rin said, opening her eyes. "It's not much, but it should compel anyone else still in the school to leave, as well as keeping other people from entering," She looked at the hole undoubtable caused by either Rider or Sonic. "That shouldn't raise too much suspicion. People will probably think it's the work of a random vandal. Now, let's get down there."

Shirou nodded. "Right, we need to offer Saber support."

"Not what I meant," Rin replied, "Saber seems to have everything under control as far as the Servant is concerned. But we can't let Sonic slip away. Not until I use some hypnosis to make him more manageable."

"You were serious about controlling him?" Shirou asked as they moved.

"Of course I was," Rin admonished her fellow Master, "Listen, Shirou, in this War, we can't afford to be careless. If an opportunity comes, we need to take it!"

"But what about that robot Saber mentioned?" Shirou stopped to look back at the battle taking place below. "Sonic might be the only one who can stop it." Judging from what Sonic had told him last night, Eggman's war machines were incredible powerful.

Rin sighed. "Look, Emiya- *kun* , you need to take the long view. Even if this 'killer robot' exists, we shouldn't get involved anyway."

"What?" Shirou couldn't believe his ears. "But what if it hurts someone?"

"People have already gotten hurt because of the War," Rin explained tiredly, "We can't spend our time snuffing out every brushfire. You have to take the longview; letting Sonic run around could expose Magecraft, remember? And if the Mage Association got wind of something like that happening in Fuyuki, they'll destroy the entire town. A flying saucer, or whatever...that's just a machine. An animal-

person who can run at the speed of sound..." She shook her head. "No amount of 'gas leaks' can hide that. Being a mage requires more than just Magecraft. You need to be able to make the right decisions, not just for the present, but for the future as well."

Shirou was about to respond, to tell her that being cold-hearted and untrusting wouldn't be favorable for the future, when his words died in his mouth. In turning to Rin, his vision was now directed out a window. And past Rin, through the glass, he could see something in the darkened sky.

A big something. Flying.

Towards them.

Rider was in a pinch, that was certain. In terms of close-combat, Saber clearly had her outmatched. Running away wasn't an option either. Anytime she managed to break off from the lady knight, Sonic would knock Rider back into the fray. She was effectively being double-teamed.

"You seem quite eager to escape!" Saber shouted as she swung her sword at Rider. She missed, and brought it up to block a chain. "Did you not get enough mana from those innocents?"

"Is fighting two-against-one the way of a knight?" Rider challenged back, "This uneven battle hardly seems chivalrous."

"Creepy stalkers don't get to talk!" Sonic yelled from the sidelines. He wanted to help, but Saber had made it clear she would prefer to fight Rider on her own. The most he did was keep Rider from escaping. If she got away, she would devour the souls of other people. If all went well, tonight would be the end of...

"LOOK OUT!"

Shirou's yell cut through all three of their thoughts. Pausing in their battle, the two Servants looked up towards the window where Shirou was. The red-haired Master seemed to be pointing at-

The giant saucer landed in the school yard with the force of an elephant dropping. It's abrupt entrance shook the ground, causing everyone present to lose their footing.

It was easily the size of small house, with a red paint job. On its side was the emblem of the Eggman Empire. A pair of massive legs, like giant pillars of steel and gears, poked out of the bottom of the saucer, lifting it up. The center of the top opened, and out from that hole came a dome-like head, with a pair of giant glowing eyes positioned on one side.

E-1076: *Arms*

Arms' head swiveled around before stopping, staring at the school.

Where the Masters were.

A port opened up on Arms' saucer-body, and out from it came a long and large metal tube. It swiveled and wobbled about in the like a tentacle, and at the end of it was a giant clamp, opening and closing like a child pretending to be a crab.

Rin had been trained as a Mage since early childhood, and even learned some basic martial arts. She had spent ten years mentally preparing herself for the Holy War, and had long since conditioned herself to be ready for *anything*. But this display of machinery was so shocking, so unlike whatever she assumed would appear in the Heaven's Feel, that her otherwise impressive reflexes were dulled by sheer shock. Shirou, meanwhile, had nowhere near the training or any expectations about the War, or that a War was even brewing. He did, however, have some foreshadowing about the metal monstrosity. This was why he had to push Rin down when Arms launched its claw at their location.

"Look out, Tohsaka!" Shirou yelled as he tackled his classmate. Barely a second passed when the glass and part of the wall exploded open. The claw struck Shirou, knocking him off of Rin and sending him flying down the hall. His body bounced twice before coming to a stop as something small and shiny fell from his pocket.

" *SHIROU!* " Saber shrieked, and forgot all about Rider instantly. Running at Arms, she swung her sword down at the robot's appendage. Though the metal was made from an impressive alloy, a quality surpassing even the finest steel, Saber's blade had been forged in an ethereal plain, commissioned by the Lady of Lake herself. The sword of Saber cleaved through Arms' tentacle, creating sparks as both ends separated. As the claw fell from the school, Arms retracted the rest of its damaged limb. The minute it did, something fast and blue bounced off of its head, rocketing through the second hole in the school. Sonic gave Rin a quick once-over.

"You okay?" He asked, and when Rin nodded her head, shaken, he raced over to where Shirou was. "How about you?"

"I'll...live..." Shirou replied, and found that this was accurate. Though his entire body was one entire painful sensation, there were no wounds, bruises, or anything that suggested he had been attacked.

"Cool." Sonic was gone in a flash, running back towards the battle. Spinning out of the hole again, he bounced off of Arms' head and landed next to Saber. By that point Arms had two of its limbs out, and seemed intent on crushing Saber. But when it saw Sonic

"Shirou's fine, Saber," Sonic reported, and looked up at the robot. "Now, let's scrap this heap!"

Saber nodded curtly. Gripping her sword, she prepared for the robot's next strike. In the short time during Sonic's brief check-up on Shirou and Rin, Arms had tried to either crush her or take her sword away. Its claws were durable enough to withstand her sword's blade, and so she had to parry its assaults on her. This was very confusing

for Arms, as according to its robotic eyes Saber didn't seem to be holding a sword.

But Arms was no longer interested in Saber. The minute it saw Sonic, Arms had a new mission. Here's how the robot's artificial thought process went;

Objective; Retrieve Chaos Emerald: Interrupted_

Does new subject have a sword? Maybe_

!

Sonic the Hedgehog has been located_

New objective: GET THE HEDGEHOG! And his little friend_

Arms stabbed his claws at Sonic, which the Hedgehog and Saber dodged, leaping to opposite sides. As the clamps were buried in the ground, Sonic took the opportunity to race up the tendrils and give Arms' head another Spinball tackle. As Arms' dome noggin shook from the impact, Saber made another attempt to slice the two claws off. Before she could get close enough, Arms began to spin its body about flailing its limbs about. Saber and Sonic hit the dirt and felt the wind as the robot's tentacles flew over them.

Up in the school building, Rin ran over to where Shirou was. By that point the Master of Saber was standing up, though still breathing heavily. He leaned against the wall, a bead of sweating dripping down his brow.

"Are...are you all right, Tohsaka?" Shirou asked, wiping his forehead. Things were happening so fast that he was exhausted just trying to keep up.

"I'm fine!" Rin shouted, a little hysterical. "But what about you!? You took a hit- *and you're not even injured!* "

"Rin, calm down," Shirou said, forgetting to use her family name. Right then, the girl's state of mind scared him more than the robot's attack.

"No! How the Hell do you keep doing it?!" Rin demanded, "First it was Berserker, and now this! You don't even have a scratch!"

"Rin, I don't know what happened with Berserker, but after he landed in my backyard, Sonic gave me some kind of charm," Shirou explained, "It was how he survived Lancer's *Gae Bolge* - A magic ring."

"A ring...?" Shirou's answer didn't provide much information for Rin, but before she could demand more exposition, the building shook again. The two Masters rushed to an unbroken window to watch the fight.

Arms now had more tentacles out, about five from Shirou's guess. It was hard to count because the robot was flailing its limbs about so quickly while spinning its body around. Sonic and Saber jumped and ran to avoiding being struck, with Saber parrying any claw that got too close. Sonic was like a spiny blue pinball, bouncing around and between the swirling metal. At one point Saber seemed to slip, and a claw grabbed her. Rather than seeming alarm, Saber smirked. She still had her arms out, and swung her sword down, chopping the tentacle off and quickly pulled herself of the claw's grip before it even hit the ground. From that claw she leapt at Arms, extending to strike its main body, only to be rebuffed by another tentacle-claw. Luckily, the loss of the other claw gave Sonic an opening to land a hit on the robot's head, before jumping away to avoid being hit by another claw.

Rin was stunned. "Wh-what is that thing? I know Saber's abilities are weakened with you as her Master, but it's still a machine against a Heroic Spirit...and the machine is winning!"

Shirou was also impressed, but he had the context Rin lacked. The previous night, following the 'Projection Incident', the three of them-

Sonic, Saber, and himself- had talked about the Hedgehog's life in his world. And from what Sonic mentioned, a recurring theme in his escapades were his encounters with the mad scientist, Dr. Eggman. If what Sonic suggested had even a kernel of truth to it, then he and the doctor had been fighting for years. In during those years, Eggman would surely have adapted his technology to keep up the Hedgehog's speed...speed that was superior to Lancer's, the fastest Servant. Of course, Shirou didn't think Saber was outmatched...but if the battle continued Homurahara Academy might suffer more damage.

But still, it rankled him. Sonic and Saber were fighting for their lives, while he was stuck on the sidelines. A vision of the fire flashed by his eyes...all those people, begging, screaming for help, and he, the only one who could move, did nothing. Shirou had sworn to never be that useless again...and yet, here he was, once again unable to do anything. But just jumping in wouldn't save anyone- and Rin would probably try to stop him.

Rin!

"Rin, can you cast another spell, like the one you tried against Berserker?" Shirou asked, turning to the Mage.

Rin nodded. "Yes, but I don't know what good it will do," She replied, "That thing is able to resist Saber's sword, I doubt a *Gandr* would do much good."

"What if you knew where to aim?"

Rin turned to Shirou. "What do you mean?"

"I've fixed more than enough machines to get the gist of basic mechanics," Shirou explained, "If you damage the right part, jam a certain gear, the thing stops working. I doubt the robot will go down as simple as that, but maybe we could slow it down enough for Saber and Sonic to finish the job."

"I can't make a shot like that!" Rin hissed, "I'm not an Archer!"

"No, but I am," Shirou replied, growing more confident. He allowed himself a smile. "I was in the archery club for a reason, after all. I may not be good at magic, but I doubt there's a target I can't hit- I actually have to work to *miss*. "

Rin didn't reply. She was staring at Shirou in shock- no, it was more like she was seeing someone else. After a moment, she nodded, her expression serious. Extending her arm, she closed her hand into a fist, save one protruding finger. A tiny ball of light began to glow at the end of the index finger. Shirou took Rin's arm, and slowly guided the pointed finger down at the robot. In order to better adjust his aim, he stepped closer to Rin, his face practically touching hers. If he hadn't been so focused on the robot, he would have been incredibly embarrassed, just as his fellow Master was.

"N-not so close, you dummy!" Rin hissed, so very glad there was no one who could see this.

Shirou wasn't paying attention to her. His entire being was on the robot. The rest of the world metaphorically melted away, save him, the robot, and the path of the projectile between the two. And even his own being ceased to be as he prepared to make the shot. To be a great archer, one had to suppress their sense of self to block out all distractions...and there was no denying that Shirou, due to the trauma he experienced during the fire, had very little self. He directed Rin's finger at the one of the sections where the legs connected with the main body. If he could damage that, the robot would be unbalanced, making it easier for Saber and Sonic to defeat.

" *Now!* " Shirou ordered.

Rin released her spell, her finger giving off a spark as the gem flew towards the robot. It struck the joint that connected Arms' leg and its foot, causing the machinery to emit sparks. the robot shifted and wobbled, but it didn't fall over. However, the brief moment it spent

unbalanced was more than enough time for Saber to jump in and slice off two claws at once. With less claws to worry about, Sonic leapt in and struck Arms' head not once, but twice. As he rebounded, Sonic flashed the two humans a grin and a thumbs up. Bolstered by Sonic's actions, Shirou allowed himself a smile as well.

"Okay, Tohsaka, another one!" he ordered, feeling more confident.

"Got it!" Rin, no longer thinking about her compromising position, prepared another *Gandr*. She no longer saw Arms as a freakish abnormality in her preconception of the world. It was now an enemy that could be destroyed. As her fingertip glowed, Shirou pointed it at the weakened component on the robot.

But before they could fire again, something shot down from the sky and blasted Arms, hitting a port where one of the remaining tentacles was. The robot staggered about, now seriously damaged. Its body began to emit electrical sparks.

"Whoa!" Sonic cried, landing away from Arms. "Where'd *that* come from?"

Up in the building, Shirou and Rin had frozen solid, but for different reasons. Shirou was just as stunned as Sonic and Saber were. Rin, on the other hand, was distracted by a voice in her head.

How are you holding up, Rin? Archer asked telepathically.

Archer! Where the heck are you!? Rin demanded through their mind-link.

I'm on a building between your house and the Academy. Give me a minute, I'll have another shot ready-

But before Archer could finish that sentence, Saber rushed in. Seizing the moment, she sliced both of Arms' legs off, causing the robot's main body to hit the ground. Rather than being defeated, Arms' saucer torso began to spin, floating up into the air. In response

to this, Sonic ran up the wall of the school building, leaping off to deliver one more blow to the head. This was the last straw. Arms began to self-destruct, all of the stress and damage it accumulated finally taking hold. The robot fell to the ground and exploded, sending burnt metal everywhere. Sonic landed next to Saber, who had remained unmoved. They stared at the pile of burning scrap.

"So, we just took down our first evil robot," The Hedgehog noted, and looked up to Saber. "Feel good?"

Saber exhaled. "I would be, if this were the final battle," She remarked, and glanced up at the sky. "But this is only the beginning, isn't it?"

Sonic shrugged. "Yup. What are ya gonna do?"

Saber just shook her head, and turned her gaze towards Shirou. So far, it looked like her Master and Rin were unharmed from the blast. Still, she would rest easier once she had returned to him.

Meanwhile, Rin and Archer were in a telepathic conference.

I saw the robot explode. Are you unharmed? The bowman asked.

I'm fine, Archer. But get over here, this whole...thing has got me on pins and needles.

I'll be there shortly. Although...

What?

Are you sure you need me? You seem to be quite comfortable where you are now.

That's when Rin realized. She and Shirou were still huddled together! Hell, Shirou still had her arm in his hand! Her cheeks ceased to remain a mild shade of red. Now, her entire face became reminiscent of a tomato. Now officially mortified, she mentally screamed at Archer to mind his own business, who broke the

connection with a telepathic snicker. Without Archer to take her embarrassment out on, she turned her rage on Shirou.

"WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING, EMIYA- *KUN*!?" She yelled furiously, and pushed Shirou away. Or tried to. Because Shirou was better built of the two, even caught off-guard, he was mostly unmoved by Rin's shove. And so, the force of the movement ended up pushing *Rin* away- and out the hole.

Into the air.

High above the ground.

" *Tohsaka!* " Shirou cried, reaching out to her. But he was too late. Rin shrieked and plummeted. Down below Sonic and Saber saw what was happening.

"Rin!" Saber gasped, and moved to catch Archer's Master. But before she could make progress, she felt Sonic tug on her dress.

"It's cool." He assured her.

Saber didn't understand how what was happening be 'cool'- until she saw what he saw.

Rin's downward trip to terra firma came to an abrupt halt when she felt something grab onto her from under her arms. She heard what sounded like very fluffy helicopter blades spinning. She looked up at whatever was holding her and gasped.

"Rin, how come you didn't tell me you and Archer were magic?" Tails asked, smiling brightly as his two tails spun.

Down on the ground, and in the school, Shirou and Saber gaped at this flagrant disrespect for the laws of physics.

"Told ya it was cool." Sonic commented, and waved. "Nice catch, little bro!"

Laughing, Tails returned the wave- before remembering that he almost dropped Rin. The Tohsaka Mage gave a rather undignified yelp as she almost fell from Tails' grip.

Once Archer had arrived, all parties convened in front of the remains of Arms. Shirou wiped some dirt off of the robot's body to reveal a symbol that looked like a round face with glasses, a mustache, and a wide crazed grin. Behind him, Sonic and Tails were having a pretty casual reunion.

"Glad to see you're doing okay, Tails," Sonic said, giving the fox a friendly rub on the head. "I don't suppose you know where Knux and Amy are, do you?"

Tails shook his head as Sonic removed his hand. "No...I guess they're not with you, huh?"

"Haven't seen 'em," Sonic sighed, and waved at Shirou and Saber. "That's Shirou and Saber. I've been hanging out at their pad. Where've you been?"

Tails grinned. "How does a night in a giant mansion sound to you? It belongs to that girl over there, Rin," He gestured towards Archer. "This is Archer, he's pretty cool."

"But not cooler than *me*, right?" Sonic asked.

"Almost...but not quite." Tails admitted. Behind him, Archer raised an eyebrow. The blue hedgehog was cooler than him?

"Heh. So, what brings you around here, stranger?" Sonic asked his little buddy.

"Archer and I saw the robot while we were out in the city," Tails explained, "I followed after it while he decided to find a building to aim from- He's the one who made the shot. Oh yeah, I forgot! Sonic, Archer's-"

"A magic ghost, right?" Sonic interrupted, watching the muscular man walk up.

Tails' ears twitched. "Wow, how'd you know?"

Sonic jerked a thumb at Saber. "Saber over there is one, too."

"The term is Servant," Archer corrected, crossing his arms. "And how did you come to that conclusion, might I ask?"

Sonic smirked. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I'd like to know as well," Rin said, and cast Shirou a dark look. "Emiya, how come this newcomer knows about Saber and Archer?"

Shirou sighed. There was no avoiding it. "Last night, when Sonic first arrived at my house, I told him about the Holy Grail War."

"You what?!" Rin's voice echoed into the night air.

Shirou held up a hand. He had anticipated this. "Listen, whether you like it or not, Sonic and Tails are different from other people. They have no choice but to hide from the rest of the world. But Sonic has a sense of justice that won't let him sit idly by when Servants like Lancer are stealing Mana from innocent people. If they know about the War, it'll be easier for them to act in secret."

Tails blinked. "War? What war?"

Shirou bent down to Tails' level and said, "It's a bit complicated, but for now you just need to know that there are other people like Saber and Archer...and that we're going to have to fight them to protect the city."

"Emiya- *kun* ..." Rin grimaced. While Shirou have something resembling a point, she felt that his logic was a bit too simplistic.

"And in any case, it's not them we should be worried about. It's this machine, " Shirou pointed out, "Why did it come here, to this place?"

Rin's anger at Shirou's carelessness faded slightly as she thought about it too. "Hmm, don't think I'm going to let you off easy, but that's something to consider. It's not like this school has anything going for it. It's not in a strategic location magically or even militaristically speaking."

"Magically?" Tails asked, confused.

Rin sighed. "If you're going to know about magic, then you might as well learn more than Shirou's half-assed knowledge. Listen, there certain points in Fuyuki where leylines intersect. These areas are..."

As Rin lectured, Sonic got bored and walked over to Saber. The blond Heroic Spirit was looking up at the sky.

"What's up?" He asked her.

"She got away," Saber looked back at Sonic intently, "The other Servant."

Sonic snapped his fingers. "Oh right, her," Looking frustrated, he yelled over to the others, "Yo! We got another problem here!"

Rin, Shirou, and Tails looked at Sonic. Rin had just finished explaining to Tails about the leylines of Fuyuki, and how they enabled the Heaven's Feel. She had said more than she intended to, but deep down she needed to think about something *familiar* in the face of the robot's attack. She had been too stunned to even think by the machine's assault, and much to her embarrassment, it had been the normally dull-witted Emiya who came up with an plan.

"What's up, Sonic?" Tails asked.

"Don't panic, but there's another Servant on the loose," the Hedgehog explained, "And she's nowhere as cool as Saber."

Archer raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?" He already had his suspicions on what Servant had been prowling around Homurahara

Academy in the dead of night. At least, if the timeline hadn't been as badly effected by the inclusion of Sonic and his friends as he hoped.

Sonic began trace an hourglass in the air. "Total babe. Wears a blindfold. Lots of purple hair, but no personality."

"I think Archer meant what kind of Servant she was." Rin said, trying to keep the irritation out of her voice.

"She said she was Rider." Sonic replied.

"When we fought, she used chains with spikes at the end." Saber put in.

"Okay, *that* is what we need to focus on," Rin nodded, "I only wish we could have gotten her to reveal her Noble Phantasm before the robot landed. We'd be one step closer to figuring out her identity..."

"Sonic, you were fighting Rider before Saber caught up with you," Shirou said, "Did she do anything...?"

Sonic thought for a moment. "Well, she didn't use her chains for anything special, but..."

"But?" Tails asked.

"Just before we ended up outside, she took off her blindfold and I froze up," Sonic explained, "I mean...my entire body went stiff, or something."

Shirou glanced up at the hole Sonic and Rider created in the school building. "But if she paralyzed you, how...?"

Sonic grinned. "I was already doing a Spin Dash when it happened. I guess being stiff and stopping are two different things."

Archer raised an eyebrow. "Spin Dash? What's that?"

"It's this cool move Sonic does that lets him charge up his speed," Tails piped up, "That way, he can go from zero to over a hundred in a second. I can do it, too!"

Tails crouched down (Which Rin, in spite of herself, thought was adorable). Then, he became an orange ball, spinning in place to the amazement of the Masters and Servants. As he spun, a whirring noise was heard, stopping when Tails shot off, speeding across the grass. It seemed like he would hit a wall, but before that happened, the fox jumped, jumped against and off the wall with his feet and did a magnificent flip before hovering with his spinning tails.

Sonic shot his little buddy a thumbs up. "Nice one, bro!"

Shirou found himself unable to stare. He had seen it before, but even then couldn't believe it. Even though he was a Mage, fighting alongside Heroic Spirits, and having just survived a robot attack, the sight of a fox-person flying like that was just too implausible.

Rin, meanwhile, was thinking about what Sonic had said. *His body was paralyzed the minute she revealed her eyes... What hero has magic eyes...*

Archer, on the other hand, thought, *Judging from what Saber and Sonic are saying, the Rider in this timeline is the same as the one in mine. If I recall, she brought out a pegasus to fight Saber with... Magic eyes, pegasus...*

Shirou's voice broke Archer's contemplation. "Archer, did you see anyone like that while sniping the robot?"

Archer gave Shirou a look. "If I had, I would have said so. Rider must have run off to avoid trouble."

"Let me take a quick look around." Sonic offered, and he was gone in a flash.

As the cloud of dust kicked up by Sonic's departure settled,, Shirou found himself looking back at the scrap heap. Even though it had attacked the school and nearly killed him, he couldn't help but be in awe at it. Unlike most mages, who were disdainfully of machines, Shirou could appreciate the technology that made this marvel possible.

Too bad it was probably built by a madman, he thought gloomily. Why were newest wonders in his life controlled by either villains or jerks?

"I doubt he'll find her," Rin commented, rubbing her eyes. "Even if Rider's still here, she's probably went into her astral form. We should leave, too. Even if the Boundary Field I set up will keep ordinary people away, it's only a matter of time if another Master or Servant shows up."

Shirou sighed and pulled himself away from Arms. "It's too bad this thing doesn't have a Servant radar we could use."

Rin rolled her eyes and scoffed. "Emiya *-kun*, Servants are formed from Magecraft, they can't appear on radar."

But Shirou's words had a much more pronounced effect on Archer. They caused a connection to form in his mind. And that connection led to answers that would probably set his Master off again.

"Actually, I think they do," The bowman said, and looked at Tails. "Tails, this Doctor Eggman would be looking for Chaos Emeralds too, right?"

Tails nodded. "Yeah, he'll need them to power his weapons."

"And that Chaos Emerald detector you showed me...how commonplace is the technology?"

Tails shrugged. "It's not that widespread, but Eggman knows how to build one too- Uh-oh!"

The little fox turned on his Miles Electric and began to fiddle with the settings. At this point Sonic returned. It was clear from the disgruntled expression on his face that the search was unsuccessful. When he saw Tails and the Miles Electric, he tugged at Saber's dress.

"Hey, what'd I miss?" Sonic asked.

the lady knight glanced down at Sonic before looking back at Tails. "Archer was talking about radar, which spurred your companion to action. I confess, I do not understand what they are getting at."

It was then that Tails spoke up. "Yeah, the Miles Electric is picking up several energy signatures," He reported, "Besides a field around us, it seems like there are several sources right on top of us."

Archer grimaced. "I thought so." *Perfect. Just what we needed, another complication!*

"What?" Rin asked, confused. "What is it? What's that thing for?"

"Rin, this device is capable of detecting the energy contained within Chaos Emeralds," Archer explained, "But it can't differentiate between them and the power of Servants," He glanced at the robot, and everyone followed suite. "That's how Tails was able to figure out I was a 'magic ghost'. And why the robot came here, I think. It thought the combined energy of your boundary field, Saber, and Rider, was a Chaos Emerald waiting to be picked up."

"Archer, that's impossible," Rin replied, though she didn't sound so convinced. "I mean, if a machine can find Servants, or even Boundary Fields..."

This was certainly news, especially for Shirou, Rin, and Saber. The idea that a mechanical device could find Servants or even Magecraft itself was a jarring one. Unlike spells, which required a certain spiritual aptitude to use, a machine could be used by the technology became widespread, the secrecy of Magecraft could be jeopardized.

As they took Archer's theory in, another piece of metal from Arms fell.

"Ugh...let's just go home," Rin decided. So far the entire night had been a roller coaster of surprises and revelations, and now she wanted off. "I need to restock my jewels, and..." She pointed at Shirou, " *You* need to stop doing suicidal things and surviving, all right?"

Shirou blinked. "Um..."

"Well, you guys be careful," Sonic cut in, "Me and Tails have some friends to find. We'll see you tomorrow morning!"

Before any of the humans could say another word, Sonic took off, becoming a blue dot in the distance. Tails flew after him.

"Bye, Rin, Archer!" He called back, "You don't need to leave a light on for me, I can get back inside, no problem!"

"H-Hey! Get back here!" Rin yelled, but it was too late. They were both gone. The Masters and Servants stared in silence, almost waiting for the other shoe to drop. When nothing happened, Shirou turned to Rin, awkwardly rubbing the back of his head.

"So, I...guess I'll see you tomorrow, Tohsaka- *san* ?" He asked.

Rin's response was the meanest glare ever. And was that a tear on the edge of her eye?

Rider leapt through the air, invisible to all except her Master. Tonight had been very...eventful, to say the least. While it had only been a matter of time before her prowling had attracted the attention of another Servant, the creature that attacked her was another matter. Judging from how they interacted, the it and Saber were no doubt on friendly terms. Perhaps it had been summoned by Saber's Master. It hadn't been another Servant, that was for sure. But it's strength was

on par with one, however, and it seemed to be immune to her Mystic Eyes. If Saber had an ally like that, it did not bode well for Rider. If that large machine had not appeared, her role in the War would have ended far sooner than she wanted. At the very least, she would have been forced to use Bellaphoron

She sighed, knowing that she would receive a bawling out from her current Master for apparently failing. She only hoped that he wouldn't take it out on her *true* Master...

Rider felt her chest ache in pain, right where Sonic had hit her. She needed to replenish her mana. Hopefully, she would find someone out and about. The night was still young.

Knuckles walked the lone streets of Fuyuki, his senses alert for even the tiniest twinge of power. It had been a very boring day, for him at least. The transport must have been more tiring than he thought, as he spent the morning and afternoon napping. At least his new friend Caster had been nice enough to let him sleep in. But he had dozed long enough. It was time to find the Chaos Emeralds, before Doctor Eggman did. He wasn't too concerned about his friends. He knew they were tough, and could take care of themselves. He had no doubt that they would find each other again. But if Knuckles didn't find the Chaos Emeralds, none of them would be able to get home. And if Eggman got them again...

Knuckles was pulled out of his reverie by the sound of people talking. Remembering what Caster had told him last night, he ducked into a nearby ally, taking refuge behind some garbage cans. Coming up were a pair of humans, a teenaged girl in a school uniform, accompanied by a tan man wearing a red long coat. Slung over his back was a bag of what seemed like...metal parts?

"...so far the night has been one disaster after another," A teenaged human girl was saying, "Between that robot and Sonic running around, we'll be lucky if the whole War doesn't end up on television."

"Just be glad it happened at night, Rin," The man said, "If you want, we can go looking for them."

Rin sighed, "The way that egotistical hedgehog moves, we couldn't catch him anyway. Let's just hope he doesn't let anyone see him again."

In his hiding place, Knuckles arched an eyebrow. *So, these guys have seen Sonic, huh? Good to know he's doing all right. What's this war they're trying to keep secret?*

"So, what are you going to do, then?" The man said, "We can't let Sonic run rampant, can we?"

"We'll take care of him tomorrow," Rin decided, "I've put too much preparation into this war to let some...mascot character ruin everything I've worked for."

As the two walked off, Knuckles glared at them from the darkness. *Looks like Caster was right. This city is full of dangerous characters. I'd better find those Emeralds before one of them falls into the wrong hands!*

Sonic and Tails raced around the city, leaping over hydrants and darting between shadows. Despite Rin's fears, they were careful not to be seen- not that it mattered. Due to the constant attacks caused by Servants like Lancer and Rider, nobody was out on the streets to begin with. After a while they stopping running and just walked.

"Man, I don't know why Shirou was so worried about us being spotted," Sonic commented, "This city couldn't be any deader than if it was a ghost town."

"If attacks like what happened at the school are commonplace, then I guess a curfew must be in effect," Tails replied, fiddling with the Miles Electric. He looked up at Sonic. "Still, I can't believe that on top of finding our friends, the Emeralds, *and* stopping Dr. Eggman, we

also have to deal with a, a, magical gang war run by a secret society, I guess?"

"Yeah, it is a lot to take in all at once," Sonic affirmed casually, "Just do what I do, focus on the bad guys we're gonna beat."

Tails chuckled. "Yeah, 'cause backstory happens to other people, right?"

Sonic gave Tails a thumbs up. "You know it."

"So...speaking of bad guys, have you seen any other Servant?" Tails asked.

"Just one more," Sonic said, raising a finger of declaration. "Lancer. He's got a magic spear that let's him warp, so that he's already stabbing you, or whatever. So if you fight him, make sure to get it away from him."

"Whoa, that's kind of intense," Tails said, looking a little perturbed. "Uh, do Power Rings help?"

"Oh, sure," Sonic replied. He self-consciously rubbed his stomach as he remembered. "Doesn't stop the pain, but it beats having a pointy stick in your heart."

Tails gulped. "I, uh...lost all of my rings when the *Tornado* crashed."

"Oh, jeez! You should have said something," Sonic fished into one of his gloves and pulled out three rings. "Here, have some of mine."

Tails gladly took the rings and put them into his own. As he did, the Miles Electric began to beep, almost causing him to drop them. Making sure the Power Rings were snug in his gloves, Tails examined the screen of the PDA.

"What's up?" Sonic asked.

"According to this, there's a high energy signature nearby," Tails reported.

"There is? Where?" Sonic began looking around eagerly.

"Just about a dozen meters ahead," Tails replied, and looked to Sonic. "And it's getting closer."

"Sounds another Servant wants to party," Sonic assumed, and did a few stretches. "Wonder which one it is?"

"I...don't know," Tails sounded worried, "But whatever it is, it's a lot stronger than the reading I got from Archer and Saber combined."

"Hmm...maybe it's a Chaos Emerald instead," Sonic considered. He took Tails by the arm. "C'mon."

The pair zipped over and hid behind a street corner mailbox. Silence ensued as they waited. The night air, combined with the tension as they waited for whatever was coming to reach them created a chill. Unfortunately, it wasn't a full moon that night- it wasn't even a crescent, and besides which, the sky was cloudy. But maybe that was perfect for the situation; an obscured moon for an unknown enemy. Of the two, Tails' heartbeat was slightly faster. This could be his first time fighting a Heroic Spirit. Sonic's pulse was a bit calmer, but he too was tense. Just waiting for things to happen wasn't his style. Just as night wind pushed a cloud away from the moon, they saw what was coming.

It was a little girl dressed in a winter coat, with a little furry hat on her head. Her long white hair was like snow, and her big, red eyes looked too much like pools of blood for either Sonic or Tails' comfort.

"It's just a kid," Tails whispered, bewildered.

"Yeah, a little kid out on her own at night in a city where mysterious murders happen," Sonic muttered, a touch of sarcasm in his voice. "*That* 's not suspicious at *all*. "

The girl continued her stroll, walking at slow pace. She hummed a happy song, swinging her legs out as she took each step. She almost appeared to be daydreaming. She then stopped, and looked around.

"I know you're there!" She called out cheerfully, "You can come out now!"

Behind the mailbox, Sonic and Tails exchanged worried looks.

"You don't think she's talking to *us* , do you?" Tails asked, whispering nervously.

Sonic rolled his eyes. "Nah, I'm sure she's calling out to the *other* Hedgehog and Fox hiding behind a mailbox."

Tails sighed. "Thought so," He glanced at the Miles Electric. "Weird...it seems like the signal's coming directly from *her* !"

Sonic kept his eyes on the girl. "Y'know, I had a feeling it was like that."

It was at this point the lone child said, "You don't have to hide from me~! I won't bite~!"

Somehow, Sonic had trouble believing that. Still, keeping still wasn't his strong point. To Tails he said, "Well, we shouldn't keep a lady waiting. Let's go."

"Aren't we supposed to stay away from people?" Tails asked.

"We're supposed to keep clear of *normal* folks," Sonic countered, "And I'm pretty sure that bundle energy is anything but."

Sonic walked out from his hiding spot and stood in the center of the street, directly facing the little girl. After a moment, Tails followed him, taking his place by Sonic's left side. He tucked the Miles Electric on his back via a strap. The little girl's red eyes lit up when she saw Sonic, and she clapped her hands together eagerly.

"I knew it, it's you!" She gasped happily.

Sonic rubbed his finger under his nose, smirking. On the outside.
"It's me."

"You're the guy who was fighting Lancer last night, aren't you?" The girl asked, "I remember seeing something zipping around the city... and then there was that explosion! That was you guys, right?"

"Kinda," Sonic admitted, his smirk fading. There was something about this child that was creeping him out. "So, if you don't mind me asking, what are you doing out here this late?"

"Me?" The girl put on an expression of innocence. "I'm just looking around. I've never been to Japan before, so I wanted to get the feel of the city."

"But, all by yourself?" Tails asked, "Isn't that dangerous?"

"Yeah, I don't suppose you've heard, but there are some pretty nasty characters out and about." Sonic put in, narrowing his eyes, "Be a shame if one of them got ahold of you."

The girl giggled, and it didn't sound at all innocent. "Oh, you two are real sweet to worry about little ol' me! But it's all right," She smiled like a cat about to eat the canary. "*I'm never alone* ."

As she said these words, the air around her began to ripple, and a large form appeared behind her. It's body faded into existence bit by bit, like a Cheshire Cat. But what materialized was as far from a feline as can be. It was man-shaped, with skin colored a dark grey, like cooked steel. It's entire body was covered in muscles, so tense that they might as well been carved from stone. It came with a massive stone sword that had a jagged edge, and fit rather snugly in the behemoth's hand. On it's face was a scowl that seemed to be stuck, and it's eyes...were not eyes at all, but twin balls of fire that burned. If the eyes represented the soul, then this soul was full of

rage, an anger that wanted to lash out and crush anything close enough. Its very presence seemed to press into the pavement.

The girl curtsied. "I am Illyaseviel Von Einzbern, Master of Berserker," She introduced, "And I wonder how well you'd fair against *my* Servant?"

Tails felt his jaw drop, and his tails go limp. "Dah... *big*..."

Sonic swallowed. Pointing a shaky finger at Berserker, he asked, "Um...I don't suppose your name is Achilles, is it?"

TO BE CONTINUED

Tiger Dojo:

Taiga: Without further delay, it's the Tiger Dojo! Fujimura Taiga, your *sensei* , has arrived!

Illya: And the number one student is here as well!

Taiga: Indeed, you are here, in both senses of the word!

Illya: Hmph, it took long enough for me to appear in the main story. Maybe now *Onii-chan* will get a proper heroine this time!

Taiga: Funny you should mention that. Our first question is from a Ms. Topaz, who asks who the heroine of *Genesis* will be.

Illya: It'll obviously be me. Those other stupid girls have had too much attention already. They're even making a movie based on the *Heaven's Feel* route where I died!

Taiga: Aren't you the main character of a spin-off *manga*?

Illya: That doesn't count, it takes place in an alternate universe. It's completely different from the main continuity.

Taiga: That is a good point. But, getting back to the topic at hand, the position of Heroine in the original visual novel was determined by the structure of the storyline; *Fate* focused on the Holy Grail War, making Saber the heroine. Rin became the heroine because of Archer's plan in *Unlimited Blade Works* , and due to Zouken's evil in *Heaven's Feel* , Sakura got her Happy Ending.

Illya: So, the title of Heroine goes to whoever *Onii-chan* thinks about the most? Then all I need is more screen time, and I'm sure to become the Heroine!

Taiga: Hold your horses! That's how it is in *Fate/Stay Night* , but things are different now! This is a crossover with the *Sonic* series! And in *Sonic* , romance is never important!

Illya: You mean there won't *be* a Heroine? That's not fair!

Taiga: Life is never fair, my student. If it was, this unsung heroine would be getting her a spin-off of her own! Hmph!

Illya: I'm starting to get depressed. Let's move on to our next question. Element-OverLord writes, "Will Shirou be able to Chaos Techniques like Shadow?" Hmm, that's an interesting thought, but I doubt it.

Taiga: Oh? How can you be so sure?

Illya: The Chaos Emeralds are similar to the Holy Grail, aren't they? Get all seven, and the ultimate power is released. But they're not omniscient. You need to present them with a method before you're able to do anything. And *Onii-chan* 's affinity is Sword, and papa never taught him any of the Emiya clan's time-manipulation Magecraft. Even if the Emeralds do enhance his power, it's unlikely that Shirou will gain any new skills.

Taiga: Ah, just as putting chocolate syrup on vanilla will make the ice cream tastier, it won't change that it's vanilla.

Illya: That's a dumb metaphor, but yeah.

Taiga: Hmm...so many different things are happening now. Dr. Eggman has begun his assault on Fuyuki, Sonic and Tails have reunited, but Amy and Knuckles are still lost in the city. What's more, the strongest Servant has appeared! What will happen? Tune in next time, to find out!

Illya: Good bye!

Kick the Rock!

Chapter 3: *Kick the Rock!*

Behold, a scene unlike any the world- ours or another's- have been host to. A street, deserted with the exception of four beings. An invisible line drawn, dividing the group into two sides. On one side, the fastest and coolest thing on two feet, Sonic the Hedgehog. Accompanying him was his best friend-slash-sidekick Miles "Tails" Prower, the two-tailed fox. Opposite of them was the tiny Master of the Holy Grail War, Illyaseviel von Einzbern. And at her side...

"RAAARGH!" Berserker swung his sword down at the dynamic duo before him. Sonic leapt to the side, pulling Tails along to avoid being crushed by the stone blade. The weapon crashed into the pavement, the force of its impact creating a fissure in the ground. A mere second later, Sonic shot from where he had left Tails and at Berserker in a spinning ball. His motion was so fast that the rage-filled Servant couldn't see it coming.

WHAM!

Sonic's body shook as he rammed foot first into Berserker's forehead. The Heroic Spirit, however, didn't react in the slightest. After a moment, Sonic fell back on the street, seemingly paralyzed.

"Sonic!" Tails exclaimed in alarm.

"Ow, ow, ow, okay, ow ..." Sonic muttered, rubbing his legs as he pulled himself up. He heard a rushing sound and zipped away from Berserker's sword before it crashed into the pavement again. He then had to rush to another spot as Berserker charged. And again. And again.

It was like a repeat of his scuffle with Lancer over the Gae Bolge, with the Servant trying and failing to reach Sonic, but there were few

crucial differences. One, the Servant still had his weapon. Two, Berserker's heavy body meant that their game of Cat-and-Mouse was causing more damage to the street than the one with Chu Chulainn. The area shook as if being hit by mortar shells. But the most striking difference of all was Sonic's suspicions that if Berserker got his hands on him, even Power Rings wouldn't be enough.

"You'll need to do more than that if you want to beat my Berserker!" Illya called out tauntingly, "After all, he's the legend of Greece, the mighty Herakles!"

So much for going after his heel. Sonic thought as he slid under Berserker's legs. Recoiling off of a street light pole, Sonic slammed into Berserker's back. Because the Servant was already slightly hunched over from a previous strike, this caused Berserker to... stumble slightly, before standing back up to turn and glare at Sonic. He lunged at the Hedgehog, who once more zipped out of his range of fire. Within a second there was no more street light.

Tails watched the spectacle, stunned at all the destruction being caused. "Oh, man! This is getting intense!" He looked around worriedly. "I hope no cops show up..."

Illya must have heard him, for she said, laughing, "Oh, you don't have to worry about any non-Mage interference, Mr. Fox! I already cast a Boundary Field to keep them out. And I certainly don't sense any of the other Masters around," She began speak in sing-song. "You're on your own~"

Tails gulped up, and found himself bouncing slightly as another of Berserker's missed strikes shook the pavement. While Sonic's was too fast to be struck, every miss made Berserker angrier. And the angrier Berserker became, the stronger and more powerful his blows became. In time, even a near miss would have repercussions.

Landing next to Tails, Sonic panted. "Okay, this isn't working," Raising his voice, he yelled, "Time out!"

Amazingly, Berserker froze. Off to the side, Illya cocked her head in confusion. "What? What is it?"

"I just got a question," Sonic said, "Do you have Herculoid here go out people-hunting, or whatever?"

Illya scrunched her face up and puffed out her cheeks adorably. "Fuuh! Don't be mean! I'm not some weak Mage with poor Circuits! I'm the strongest Master with the strongest Servant! I don't need to send Berserker out like Lancer or Rider's Master!"

"That's all I needed to hear," Sonic took Tails by the arm. "Later!"

And in a flash they were gone, leaving behind a trail of dust in their wake. Although it was hard to tell due to the night's darkness, a increasingly small dot could be seen on the horizon. Illya and Berserker blinked uncomprehendingly at what happened.

Then Illya caught on. "Hey! Get back here!" Fuming, she turned to Berserker and pointed down the road. "Go after them, Berserker!"

Berserker didn't even bother to nod. The pavement under his feet cracked from the pressure as he took off in a run, following after the escaping heroes. With each step he took, another crack in the street was made, making it seem like someone had taken a sledgehammer to the road.

"...Hey, wait for me!" The Einzbern Master cried and ran after her Servant, and proceeded to demonstrate a vocabulary too advanced for her apparent age.

Further ahead, Tails tried to keep his grip on the Mile Electric with his free hand as Sonic pulled him by his other arm. Although it was hard to tell with their velocity, he thought he heard something behind him. Daring a peek over his shoulders, the fox saw none other than Berserker bearing down on them! Although Sonic was faster, the mad Servant had a far longer stride, and no need to go around

obstacles. Precious seconds spent jumping over hydrants and going around mailboxes gave the Heroic Spirit time to close the gap.

"Sonic, he's catching up!" Tails yelled in a panic.

Sonic groaned. "Figures. Okay, here's the plan. I'll keep Bizarro-kles busy. You fly around and look for a CCS."

Tails nodded. While he was still a bit worried, the fact that Sonic hadn't given up raised his spirits. As he began to spin his namesake limbs around, he said, "Let's re-sync our comms before I go!"

"Right!" Sonic pulled up his glove and Tails', revealing wristwatch like bands with small screens and speakers, and pushed the buttons. After a minute, a cheerful 'Beep' was heard.

Tails took to the sky, giving Sonic a wave before going off and away. Berserker didn't even give the departing fox a glance. His mind, diminished by a rage that was not entirely his, was completely set on the Hedgehog.

Get the Hedgehog.

Catch the Hedgehog.

Crush the Hedgehog!

While this high-speed high-stakes chase of life and death was being run, Shirou and Saber were taking a leisurely walk back towards the Emiya estate. The only part relaxed about them was their pace, however. Many questions were buzzing through their minds as they tried to consider on what course they should take for the War, especially now that they knew that the city would be attacked by giant robots. They were lucky the first one had appeared at night, and in a relatively deserted area. It would have been a disaster if the battle had taken place in daylight. Though, admittedly, a robot wasn't

likely to expose the existence of Magecraft, it would be impossible for them to fight in public.

And then there was the robot itself. It was big, dangerous, and could even put Saber on her guard. Shirou knew that if it hadn't been for the Power Ring Sonic lent him, the robot would have killed him then and there. The Emiya Master glanced at Saber, walking alongside him with a neutral expression on her face. While she appeared disinterested, Shirou suspected that his Servant was thinking about the dangers the robots presented. He didn't want her to risk herself again. Not for him.

Before he could express these concerns, Saber spoke up. "Shirou, I would like to ask something of you."

"Huh?"

"If Dr. Eggman sends another machine to attack, I want you not to interfere," She said, "The next time a robot appears, please run away. Do not risk yourself."

Shirou stared at her wordlessly. How could she ask that? After the way she risked her own life! But before he could respond, a faint whirring noise caught his attention. Looking up, he saw something orange flying in the night sky.

"Is that Tails?" He asked, pointing.

Saber looked as well, and with her superior senses saw that's exactly who it was. "Tails!"

For a moment, it seemed like the two-tailed fox didn't hear them. Then, he turned back and lowered himself to the Master and Servant's level.

"Saber! Shirou!" Tails said, "Quick, do you know if there's a construction site around here?"

Shirou was baffled by Tails' request, as well as the harried tone he said it in. "I-I think there's a building being built east from here, but what do you want to know?"

"Did something happen?" Saber asked, "Where's Sonic?"

"That's what I'm talking about!" Tails, flying off. "Sonic's fighting a Servant! A giant monster called Berserker!"

Berserker!

Horried, Shirou chased after Tails. "Tails, wait! Saber, we-!" Looking back at his Servant, he saw that she was already in motion.

While Saber knew that a confrontation was inevitable, she couldn't believe how quickly her rematch with Berserker had come. Not that she had been in any particular hurry to fight the monstrous Servant. Neither she nor Rin or Archer had come up with a plan to counter the godly might of Herakles at this time, their planning sidetracked by the appearance of Sonic and co.. It was definitely too soon for them to consider another fight with the Einzbern Servant. That said, they also couldn't allow Sonic to face that behemoth on his own. Changing back into her armor, the lady knight increased her speed as she followed Tails.

Sonic, meanwhile, had fallen into a rut. Without Tails to weigh him down slightly, the Hedgehog was having a better time keeping ahead of Berserker. His superior speed was such that even the Servant's large strides weren't enough to bridge the gap. But a Servant's strength did not come just from their myths- the power of their Master had to be taken into consideration. A Servant was not just brought into the world by their Master, but that Master also gave them the Mana needed to utilize their Noble Phantasm, or even exist. What made the Berserker class so dangerous was that they consumed Mana without pause, and often enough killed their own Masters from tapping the well dry.

But Illya was a far superior class of Master. She had been designed by the Einzbern family to process the maximum amount of Mana a living being could manage. And she was so skilled that she had perfect control over her Servant. Berserker did not have to worry about his energy. It would only be a matter of time before Sonic tired out and be at the giant's nonexistence mercy.

Sonic, however, wasn't patient enough to wait for that to happen. Thanks to his previous "running duel" with Lancer, he already had a decent understanding of the city's layout, so a plan was beginning to form. Taking a quick turn, Sonic led Berserker off of the street and down a park path. He zipped past a garbage can, banging it slightly as he grabbed something sticking out of the top. Berserker knocked it over. Sonic checked the banana peel he had snagged and was happy- though a bit disgusted- to see that it was sufficiently aged. Spotting a railing that went down, Sonic put his plan into motion. Dropping the peel, he raced over to the top of the stairs and ducked. Had Sonic been summoned to Fuyuki as a proper Servant, his luck skill would have been A+, for against all odds Berserker stepped on that peel. Ordinarily, slipping on a banana peel would have only tripped someone up momentarily, but Berserker's momentum had sent him airborne, causing him to fly over Sonic's head and down the stairs. Berserker bellowed and raged as he tumbled. Had he not been consumed with fury, the hero Herakles could have easily caught his balance. But the Berserker-class' strength was in a way its own weakness, empowering the Heroic Spirit at the cost of its sanity. Flailing, Berserker pulled out the railing out from the stone as he tried to stop himself, and ended up wrapping himself in metal.

Sonic watched this with disinterest.

"I must be getting old, the banana-peel gag used to be funny," He remarked. There was a loud crash and a car alarm blared, causing him to wince. "I hope that was insured," his communicator beeped. "Tails?"

"Sonic! I found a CCS! Just follow the GPS to my position!" Tails voice blared over the tiny speaker.

"Got it. See you there."

The screen flickered, then showed an arrow that spun around before pointing in one direction. Sonic looked that way and nodded. Before running, he glanced down and saw Berserker glaring at him, having pulled himself from what used to be a Toyota. Sonic gave the Heroic Spirit a mocking wave before speeding off, and the Servant resumed his pursuit.

CCS; **C**onvenient **C**onstruction **S**ite. To the imaginative warrior with plenty of ingenuity and no weapons, a building zone can turn even the most one-sided of fights around. Jackhammers, cement mixers, and even And in large cities, there was always at least one construction project being held. And at night, security was always lax. This was why no one raised a fuss when a two-tailed fox boy arrived. Tails gave a quick look around and was happy to see that everything he and Sonic would need to take down Berserker had been left out by the typical lax standards. But he would have to set things up, first. By the time Shirou and Saber reached the site, Tails was hard at work, dragging bags of cement across the yard.

"What's he doing?" Shirou asked.

"I do not know for certain, but if I were to guess, I would say he is setting up a trap of sorts," Saber replied. She had already materialized her armor. "A skilled warrior also utilizes the terrain to their advantage." Still, it was obvious that despite their talk last night, Sonic was underestimating the power of a Servant- especially since that Servant was Berserker. Mundane traps would do little to slow the Heroic Spirit- they would, at worst, make him angry.

"Shirou, go help Tails," Saber ordered, summoning her sword. "I will be on guard in case any enemies appear."

Shirou nodded. "Right. How long do you think we have before someone shows up?"

Saber sensed a presence approaching and closed her eyes in consternation. "None whatsoever."

The both of them turned and saw a huge dust cloud on the horizon, accompanied by a subtle series of tremors. In seconds Sonic the Hedgehog had arrived. As he entered the compound, Sonic leapt over the Master and Servant, landing near a water cooler. After giving himself a quick drink, he ran over to where Tails was.

"Need a hand, shorty?" Sonic asked.

"Sonic!" Tails looked around. "What happened? Where's Berserker?"

A loud crash answered Tails' question. Gulping, he turned to look at the source of the noise. Berserker stood at the entrance, more specifically, he stood at the new hole in the fence surrounding the site. Before him stood Saber and Shirou, who were both tense and confused at the monstrous Servant's appearance. But mostly confused. Mostly because Berserker now had several jagged pieces of metal and glass stuck in his hair. Not to mention a bumper sticker with the phrase "Wide Load" had gotten stuck on his chest.

"Uh, new question...what happened to *him* ?" Tails asked, pointing. "Did he fall into someone's car?"

"Pretty much."

Berserker must have heard Sonic, for he directed his red-as-the-flames-of-Hell-eyes at the Hedgehog and put all of his terrible rage into one fearsome glare. He then raised his mighty stone sword- which now had a stop sign impaled on the end- and *charged*. Sonic shoved Tails and leapt away, just in time to avoid being crushed by the impending blade. The bag of cement, however, lacked the Hedgehog's mobility.

PWASH!

A cloud of grey powder enveloped Berserker, and for one brief moment only his Red Eyes of Doom© could be seen. Once that moment ended, the mad Servant stormed out from the cement and made another charge at Sonic.

"Trrrrrya!" Saber screamed as she leapt into action. The lady knight put herself between Berserker and Sonic and swung her sword as hard as she could. Blades- one invisible to the naked eye and the other carved from stone- met, and the air shook from the impact. Saber knew that if she blocked entirely not only would her sword be destroyed, but she might lose an arm. Instead, she tried to parry the blow, and succeeded...in not losing her blade or arms. She was simply blown away by the sheer force of Berserker's swing, but managed to avoid being knocked off of her feet. Off to the side, Shirou rushed to Tails' aid, helping him back onto his feet.

"Are you all right?" The red-haired Master asked.

"Sh-Shirou?" Tails blinked, "What are you doing here?"

Shirou looked to where the Servants and Sonic were. "Helping, I hope..."

Berserker had taken another swipe with his mighty sword, which Sonic and Saber had to dodge. And dodge. And they kept dodging, because Berserker would not stop swinging. It was difficult business, as Berserker's speed and strength meant that even close calls had enough force to create small gusts. Luckily, the sheer power Berserker put into his attempted blows was also a godsend in disguise. Swinging around Berserker's umpteenth attack, Saber thrust her sword downwards at Berserker's feet. She knew this wouldn't hurt the mad Servant, but with his momentum...

Her ploy worked. Berserker tripped over her blade, and though the force of the collision almost knocked it out of her hands, it was worth the sight of watching the Fifth War's Strongest Servant stumble. Not one to let an advantage slip, Saber retracted her sword and

prepared to strike. She did not know if her attack would work, but it worth a chance.

Before she could act, Berserker had pushed himself back up, forcing himself into an awkward handstand using the speed of his fall. He was on his feet in a second and bearing down on Saber. It was then that a blue blur zipped by and snatched Saber up, pulling her away. Berserker tried to follow- and fell down. Somehow, his legs become entangled in a chain. The raging Servant fumbled for a minute before snapping the links.

"Jeez, and those were *good* chains!" Sonic groaned as he helped Saber up. He looked up to her. "You got any ideas?"

"Yes," Saber replied, taking a stance. "Run. I will hold Berserker off, while you take Tails and Shirou-"

"Okay, that's not going to happen for two reasons," Sonic interrupted, "One, it's taking two of us just to keep tall, dark and ugly there distracted. No way you can do it on your own. And two, I'm not going to just leave you here all alone."

"This is my battle, Sonic," Saber insisted, "Servants are meant to fight."

"Maybe," Sonic considered, "But unless you've got a plan besides 'hit him real hard', I'm not sure this is a fight you can win. What's to stop him from just mowing you down and chasing after us?"

Saber gritted her teeth. She hated to admit it, but she didn't have much of a plan for fighting Berserker. That Heroic Spirit was not a warrior who could be felled by a single opponent or normal tactics. Her only hope was to keep Berserker occupied while the others made their escape. It was a small hope. A very small hope.

"Hee hee- *HAH* -hee! See now?"

A very small figure staggered into the construction zone. It was a person our heroes had seen before, but there was something different. Her white hair was frazzle and tangled, her cute features dripping with sweat. Her arms hung loose at her sides. Slumped over, Illya dragged herself over to a pile of lumber and sat down on one of the planks.

"My Berserker is... *HUFF* ...the strongest Servant there is!" She tried to gloat between gasps of breath, but the pain was too great and she fell on her back. "I'm just...just gonna lie here while he kills you..."

Did she run all the way here by herself? Shirou thought as he loaded more cement. Tails had told him his plan for dealing with Berserker, but he wasn't sure how well it would work. It sounded like something out from an *anime*. But nothing else seemed to work on Berserker, so the only other option was...

Illya.

Shirou knew that in order for a Servant to exist in the world, they would need a constant flow of Mana from their Master. Ergo, the easiest way for a Master to defeat a Servant would be to cut off that supply. And that would mean killing that Mage.

Illya was exhausted. Her Servant was preoccupied. Even a half-trained amateur like Shirou could do it.

But *would* he?

Illya was aware of Shirou's eyes on her, and could accurately guess his thoughts. *Will you take this chance, Big Brother? Are you truly...* A bitter feeling welled up inside. *Kiritsugi's chosen apprentice?*

... His favorite son?

It seemed like an easy solution. It could solve so many problems. Shirou knew it.

"Shirou, quite spacing out and help me!" Tails yelled.

...And he also knew that there was no way he would sink that low. Illya, as he saw, was a child, albeit one with a very disturbing thought pattern. There was no way Shirou could bring himself to harm a child. Also, Mage or not, she was in no condition to fight back. Shirou knew he was being excessively naive, but he couldn't in good conscious attack a little girl while she was in that state.

But as he helped Tails with his own plan, he wondered if there was anything else he could do to help...

While this most dangerous of dances was going on, another encounter was about to be had on the other side of the city. Team Archer continued their journey back to the Tohsaka Mansion, blissfully unaware of what Team Saber had stepped into, and what was trying to step on Team Sonic. That was not to say that their little walk was anything peaceful. Recent events had turned Rin's nerves to maximum power, and with a lack of enemy to fight she turned her pent-up antagonism on Archer. Archer, for his part, knew that Rin was only ranting to blow off steam and was doing his best to both ignore her and stay aware of their surroundings. The giant robot may have scared off Rider, but that didn't mean the city was safe- if anything, the inclusion of giant robots had given the bowman reason to wonder what else was hiding in the shadows.

"...And why are you dragging all of that junk with you?" Was how Rin ended her tirade, giving the large bag Archer had a scornful look.

"It's salvage," Archer replied. He had a feeling that they would be having this discussion many times. "We'll need it to fix the plane."

The bag in fact contained many parts- gears, circuit boards, and other miscellaneous bits of technology that were once contained within the robot that attacked Homurahara Academy. Archer, with some help from Shirou, graciously helped himself to the remains- it wasn't every day that the chance to loot an alien machine just fell

into one's lap. But more importantly, he thought that the salvage could be used to finish the repairs to Tails' plane, *The Tornado*. While countless years as a Counter Guardian had given him the personality of hard deadwood, he still enjoyed the little things in life, like cooking and repair jobs.

But all that didn't distract the Heroic Spirit from one very important fact; *They were being followed*.

"Besides, wouldn't you like to be the first Mage to have an alien vehicle in your backyard?" Archer asked, and sent the following telepathic message. *Someone's watching us, but don't react or change the subject*.

To her credit, Rin played along. "I don't *want* that loud roaring machine fixed, Archer. It almost destroyed my house, remember?" *What is it, a familiar of some kind?*

"That was an accident, Rin," Archer set the bag down and began to ruffle through it. "Like magecraft, technology is only as good as the person using it. Take this, for example," He held out a piece of bent and jagged metal. "With the right application, this scrap could be a tool for defeating out enemies."

And with that, Archer threw the metal as hard as he could at precisely 7 o'clock. The scrap flew into a dark alley, knocking over several garbage cans. This had the net effect of flushing out their observer, who landed in the center of the street.

Knuckles the Echidna bunched up his fists and glared at the Servant/Master duo before him.

"Another one!" Rin yelled, tensing.

This guy must be Knuckles. Archer thought, and relaxed slightly.

This turned out to be a big mistake. Knuckles charged at the two, a punch in motion. Archer grabbed Rin and pulled her out of the way,

allowing the spiked fist to hit the pavement harmlessly.

CRUNCH!

...Although, given the size of the cracks forming around where said fist landed, the term "harmless" would be a matter of debate. Knuckles, for his part, seemed to suffer no such injury.

"Hey! What was that for!?" Rin shouted, "What did we do!?"

Knuckles got up and took a boxing stance. "I know what you've got in store for Sonic and Tails. There's no way I'm letting anyone put my friends under their control! I don't know what kind of war you're fighting, but you can count us out!"

Archer quickly realized what Knuckles was getting at. *Oh, God. He thinks we're the bad guys.*

Rin also figured that out. "No, no, no, you've got the wrong idea, little red guy," She put on a friendly and inviting expression. "See, we're friends with those guys. Why don't you come with us, and we'll take you to see Sonic."

Knuckles wasn't moved. He recalled what Caster had said earlier...

"Oh? You're going out?" The cloaked woman asked.

Knuckles nodded. "That's right. I need to find the Chaos Emeralds if I'm going to get home. My friends are out there, too."

"Hmmm...I wish you luck, then," Caster said, "If you find anyone, feel free to bring them here," She smiled in a sinister manner that Knuckles didn't pick up on. "I would be more than happy to offer them asylum."

Knuckles blinked, then smiled. "All right, I'll keep that in mind."

"Oh...one more thing. There are many dangerous people in the city right now...some who will not hesitate to take advantage of a kind

soul like yourself..."

With that in mind, Knuckles said this in response, "Yeah, right, like I'm gonna fall for that. How dumb do you think I am?"

Rin gritted her teeth. *Figures that the third one would be just as difficult. But I'm prepared this time.* Concentrating, she cast a hypnosis spell and sent it at Knuckles- and found it was rebuffed. *Wha-!? it's not working!?*

Knuckles charged again, and this time Archer jumped into his path. Projecting his swords Kansho and Bakuya, he crossed them to block Knuckle's fist with their blunt side. To his amazement, he found himself being pushed back by the force of the blow.

Holy crap, he's strong! The bowman thought.

Rin was concerned for other reasons. *Why didn't the spell work? Does he have a natural immunity to Magecraft, or...*

At the Ryuudou Temple, the Servant Caster watched Knuckles and Archer face off through her crystal ball.

Ho ho ho, nice try, Master of Archer, The witch thought triumphantly, I've already put Knuckles under my control! But I doubt you would have succeeded, in any case. He has impressive spell resistance, that Knuckles. I wonder if it has anything to do with those Emeralds...or being from another world...

Caster did not doubt Knuckles' story for a second. While modern-day Mages would have been skeptical of his claims, Caster was not. She had come from the era of the Gods, and knew that such things were possible. And the power she sensed when the outsiders first appeared...there could be no denying it. It was very convenient that Knuckles wandered onto her doorstep. She had been able to bewitch him as soon as he went to sleep. However, her good fortune ended there. Her divinations had shown that the rest of the off-

worlders had already been discovered by the other Masters. Saber and her Master in particular had developed a rapport with the one called Sonic. That wasn't good. Sonic was already strong and skilled enough to fight a Servant on even grounds, and with those Power Rings was basically immune to fatal blows. And if he had the same spell resistance Knuckles had, making him her thrall would be next to impossible. She suspected that the only reason she won the Echidna over was due to his own natural gullibility. Sonic seemed a bit more cynical. She would have to be cautious in dealing with him.

But if Knuckles found one of these Chaos Emeralds and brought it back to her...Caster smiled.

Archer jumped to avoid another of Knuckle's charges, and the Echidna slammed his fist into a nearby lamp post, knocking it over. While in the air, Archer threw *Kansho*, hoping to knocking Knuckles down with the blunt side of the sword. No such luck. With his other fist Knuckles *punched* the sword away! The magnetic connection between the two swords allowed *Kansho* to return to Archer's grip as he reviewed his options.

If Rin hasn't already tried putting this guy under her control, then his spell resistance must be higher than what her Magecraft can handle, The bowman thought, *And since he won't listen to reason, the only thing to do is knock him out. But with what?* Archer had plenty of swords at his beck and call- If one considered the ability to materialize anything he kept in his memory that- but most of the ancient weapons he could Project were of the "Kill the enemy in one blow' variety. And as appealing as OHK-ing Knuckles sounded at the moment, Archer knew that he would get complaints from the moral guardians. *Too bad I didn't find a healing shiv in my life .*

Rin had a similar dilemma. The spells she had stored in her gems were mostly offensive, and ever since the encounter with Berserker she had tried to store spells capable of bringing down elephants. (Given her luck so far, they would probably make the giant ticklish) She didn't have any healing magic capable of undoing the damage

those gems could cause. And there was the chance that Knuckles had one of those Power Rings, meaning that any Jewels she shot wouldn't be effective anyway. It would be a waste of a spell either way, and quality jewels for the Tohsaka Magecraft didn't come cheap.

Worse, the brawl would undoubtedly attract the attention of other Servants and Masters. If that happened, there were two likely outcomes; 1) They might jump in and make the battle even more confusing, or 2) would use the opportunity to spy and learn more of Archer's abilities. And in the Holy War, information could save or end lives. If they were lucky, Sonic might hear the ruckus and come by to quell Knuckles' antics...but luck was in small quantities lately.

But luck was a quirky thing, especially in this universe. Knuckles smirked, and said, "I could do this all day- but I've got Emeralds to find. Do yourselves a favor and keep clear of Sonic, or any of my other friends!"

And with that, Knuckles ducked down, curling up into a ball. Then, (much to Archer and Rin's shock) he began to spin dash! The Echidna then shot off into the darkness of the night, far out of sight.

"He can do that too!?" Rin cried out in shock.

"Looks like," Archer remarked. He didn't dematerialize his swords, but he no He shot after the Echidna, but found no trace of him. Reinforcing his eyes, he that some distance away there was a fresh hole in the street. "He must have gone down into the sewers. Want me to go looking for him?"

Rin sighed, slumping against a wall. "No, don't bother. We got lucky that he attacked us while we were alone. If we chase after him, we might attract more attention. We're going to need that stupid Hedgehog if we're going to calm him down. Let's get back to the mansion and come up with a plan."

She only hoped that Shirou's walk to his own house was peaceful, at least.

This is probably the least peaceful night yet , Shirou thought as he loaded the last bag of cement into the truck. And what was worse, he had a feeling that nights in the future would be even less peaceful.

"Okay, I think we've got enough," Tails called out, "Now, we just need to start this bad boy up and- Uh, oh."

"What's wrong?" Shirou ran over to the truck's cabin, concerned.

"There's no key! I'm gonna have to hot wire the truck. Hold on."

Shirou didn't know how a fox could hot wire, but as he looked back at where the Servants and Sonic were, he wished it was a skill he had. Watching Sonic and Saber dancing around Berserker put the teenaged Mage's nerves on the edge. He *hated* not being able to help. But he knew that he lacked the speed or skill to keep up with the brutish Servant. Last night's little encounter with the stone ax had been very educational in that regard. Also, Shirou wasn't eager to get torn up all over again. Still, there had to be *something* he could do to help. Being stuck on the sidelines was the worse.

The sound of an engine roaring to life broke into the Mage's thoughts.

"Okay, we're good to go!" Tails called out, "Now, all we gotta do is get Berserker into position," Tails poked his head out the cab window. "See if you can get their attention!"

Shirou nodded, and began to wave his arms at the ones fighting Berserker. Although, "Fighting" would be a very generous term to use. Sonic was doing a serviceable job of staying out of Berserker's reach, but only because he didn't stop, whereas Berserker's charges involved crashing into things, and spending crucial seconds getting back up. And Saber, while lacking the speed and brute force of

either, had her experience and instincts as a warrior to help predict Berserker's next move...although the fact that the Grecian warrior wasn't even paying attention to her at this point helped to a degree.

The fact was that the battle had devolved into yet another game of Cat-and-Mouse, Holy War edition©. And more importantly, both of the game's protagonists were too busy trying to avoid crushing death to really notice anything Shirou could do. The Master of Saber realized that this after the third wave.

I could shout, but I'm sure they wouldn't hear me, Shirou thought, And if they did, Illya might catch on and give Berserker a warning. I need to get their attention without actually giving a clue as to what we're doing...

Well, Sonic probably knows what we're working on. I wouldn't be surprised if he came up with this scheme to begin with. And Saber might pick up on it. I wish I had some magic that could be used to send a signal...

And that's when Shirou's mind went back to what Sonic said last night...

Sonic brightened. "Now, that sounds awesome. You just snap your fingers, and it's there?"

Projection...was it worth another try? And what would he create? An image of a bow appeared in Shirou's brain. It was rather dark, and ominous-looking, but still a bow nonetheless. Shirou honestly didn't know why such things were occurring to him- and whether or not he would succeed.

Another crash alerted him to the fact that Berserker had another near-miss. And from the looks of things, the missed hits were getting nearer or nearer. The fight was beginning to wear down on both Sonic and Saber, while Berserker's energy was just as relentless as it always had been.

Feeling his muscles tighten, Shirou realized that he couldn't afford to dither on the subject. The time had come for action. Holding out his hand, he began to form Mage Circuits, silently hoping that this time the spell wouldn't go out of control like it did the night before.

" *Trace On.* "

That same hot-rod feeling returned, as did the horrible burning sensation in his nerves. But this time it was subdued, more subtle. In the back of his mind, Shirou wondered if this was because his skill was improving...or that his pain receptors were becoming dull. In any case, energy began to swirl around his hand, condensing, taking form. Shirou tried to force out all distractions, putting every ounce of his brain on the image of the bow.

"Shirou, what're you- *Whoa.* " Tails stopped talking when he saw what was taking place.

The thing in Shirou's hand was a bow, sort of. It was definitely bow-shaped. But it wasn't the bow that he had intended. The weapon he held had too many jagged edges, too many superfluous points. It looked like something a child would draw up.

Of course an amateur like me would get it wrong, Shirou thought, I just hope it works...!

Picking up a stray pipe that had been lying on the ground, Shirou loaded his 'bow' and took aim. It was hard to hold, and he had to spend a few seconds adjusting his grip, but in short time he was 'in the zone', his mind excluding everything but his target. Even the slight buzz in his nerves and hot-rod feeling in his back couldn't distract him.

Shirou released the bow, and the pipe flew at Berserker. It could not have hurt Berserker. It would not hurt Berserker. The Heroic Spirit of Herakles had been blessed with unbreakable skin by the Gods themselves. By his divine relation to Zeus, nothing less than an attack that had the rank of A could break that defense. A measly

pipe, fired from a poorly-Projected might as well have been a fly ramming itself against a brick wall.

But even a fly might be noticed if it flew into someone's eye, just as the pipe went at Berserker. It had done no damage- A fly against a wall, remember- but just like any other person, Berserker did not like having his eye poked. Grabbing the pipe before it could even fall to the ground, Berserker promptly bent the metal into a series of knots, grumbling with fury. In the scant seconds as he did, Sonic and Saber looked over to the pipe's origin, and saw Shirou gesturing wildly towards the cement truck. Meanwhile, Berserker finished his work with the pipe by crushing the mutilated thing into a ball and chucking it into the distance. There was a soft sound like glass breaking, but no one paid attention to that. More engrossing was that Berserker now *had Shirou in his sights!* And from the increased intensity in his eyes, the monstrous Servant had figured out just who sent that pipe into his left eyeball.

Saber was the first to act. Knowing that trying to block the giant was a futile and more-than-likely painful endeavour, she slammed the hilt of her sword into the joint of Berserker's right leg. No matter how big or divinely enhanced he was, Berserker still had the normal (Relatively speaking) build of a human being, so this act caused his leg to ache and trip him up. And because Berserker began to put himself into motion when this happened, the massive Heroic Spirit's tumble sent him rolling *far* across the lot, stopping just a few feet away from the cement truck's back. Before he could get up, Sonic slammed down on his head from above. It didn't hurt, but it did force Berserker to kiss the dirt for a few seconds more.

"Let 'er rip, Tails!" Sonic yelled, and zipped off of Berserker's noggin.

Just as Berserker pushed himself up, there came a beeping noise. Looking up, the Heroic Spirit saw that the cement truck's mixer was rising, and out from the opening a great deal of wet concrete poured out- onto him!

As Berserker writhed, trying to shake the wet cement off of him, Sonic began to zip around him. By doing so, he created a small tornado, a tactic he used to send robots flying. The cyclone his speed create wasn't strong enough to lift Berserker, but it WAS enough to lift and cover the cement. Combined with wind created by the hedgehog-created tornado, it didn't take long for the immense Servant to be completely cloaked in concrete. Once he was done, Sonic stopped and took a few steps back to observe his work. A tense hush fell over the scene as the gang watched to see what would happen next. Saber gripped her sword, ready to attack.

They did not have long to wait. The cement mound shook, before exploding as Berserker burst free of his makeshift prison.

"Awww, man!" Sonic groaned, shielding his to avoid being hit by the shards. "I was kinda hoping that would work!"

Illya laughed. "Hahaha! Nice try, blue boy! But my Berserker can't be beaten by such simple tricks like that! But don't give up yet, I want to you and *Onii-chan* to struggle a bit more-"

A piece of rubble, thrown into the air by Berserker's violent escape from the concrete, hit Illya in the head, cutting her off. A lump growing and her eyes spinning, the Einzbern Master fell down onto the ground. As the dust settled, Berserker rose to full height, looming over all that were present. Then, he glanced over at Illya. The angry scowl on the servant's face grew even darker as he shot Sonic a glare.

"Hey, for the record, YOU did that." Sonic defended.

Still glaring, Berserker stomped over to where Illya lay. Then, with a tenderness that was uncharacteristic for his class, he gently picked Illya up, cradled her in his arms, and stalked off. The ground shook with each step, but Berserker made no motion against the heroes. He stopped once at the edge of the compound, but all the Servant did was look over and deliver a very powerful glare at the four, before resuming his trek. Once Berserker was out of sight, they all

stopped holding their breath. Little did any of them realize, that Berserker's surprisingly lucid decision to take Illya home would become the source of a new legend in Fuyuki; *The Legend of the Child-bearing Neanderthal*.

"Whoa...who woulda guessed that tall, dark and gruesome had a soft side underneath those unbreakable muscles?" Sonic asked, letting out a somewhat nervous laugh.

Saber sighed. "This isn't funny, Sonic. We came very close to dying." Still, she inwardly reflected on the shocking action of Berserker. Berserkers were supposed to be nigh-impossible to control, and, from what she knew, would not stop until their opponent was dead. Did Illya, with her remarkable power, instill a command to focus on her safety into Berserker's mind?

"I just hope he doesn't hurt anyone," Tails said, hopping out of the truck's cab. "Is everyone all right?"

"We are not seriously injured," Saber replied.

"That's good," Tails looked around at what used to be a construction lot. "Man, this place is a mess."

"Tell me about it," Sonic chuckled, "I Think someone should tell Berserker to ease up on the collateral damage."

Shirou took in the wreckage. Berserker's near-misses had indeed caused a lot of collateral damage. Orderly stacks of materials had been strewn about. There were large fissures in the ground where Berserker's sword had landed. The only piece of equipment that hadn't been broken was the cement truck. It looked more like an army had taken a bat to the place.

"We need to get out of here," The young Mage said, "I couldn't put up a Boundary Field, so someone must have heard the fight and will come to investigate."

"Well, the night's still young, so I think I'm gonna take one last look around the city before calling it quits," Sonic decided, "Tails?"

"Yeah, another hour wouldn't hurt," Tails agreed, and looked towards Team Saber. "Are you two going to be all right on your own?"

"We will be fine," Saber replied, "We are going to go straight home."

"Y-yeah." Shirou hoped Taiga and Sakura wouldn't be too upset with him being out this late...

"You do that," Sonic nodded, "Be careful. Let's go, bro!"

Sonic ran off, with Tails flying after. Once they were gone, Saber felt her legs give out. As she fell, her armor faded away to show the casual clothes Rin lent her. Shirou just barely caught her in time.

"Saber-!" He gasped.

"It's nothing," She gasped unconvincingly, "Just a little...tired."

Shirou realized that with the scant Mana he provided, Saber was forced to use up her own energy. Fighting all these battles...first against Rider, then the robot, and finally Berserker...it was too much. *And she wasn't fully recovered from fighting Lancer!*

Rather than saying that aloud, Shirou began to help Saber walk. As they marched, he felt a small bit of unhappiness and resentment for himself. He just wished he was a little bit stronger...!

Far in the distance, Sonic and Tails were also a bit perturbed over what had happened.

"We got out okay because Shirou and Saber helped us," Tails remarked, "But what about Knuckles? As far as we know, they're completely clueless about this 'Holy War', thing."

"No kidding," Sonic agreed, "It would suck if one of these evil Masters got a hold of them."

Amy took a sip of her tea. "So, let me get this straight. In this world, you've got wizards and witches who are supposed to stay hidden."

"The term is Mage," Bazett corrected, "And yes. Magecraft is supposed to remain secret. Ordinary people are not allowed to know about it."

Amy and Bazett were no longer in the Fuyuki Hospital. Although Bazett still hadn't fully recovered, she felt that staying there with her new friend was too much of a risk. While the Irish Mage seemed to have successfully hypnotized the entire hospital staff into forgetting Amy existed, there was always a chance that someone would notice and cause a disturbance. Furthermore, she wanted to discuss the situation with the pink hedgehog in private. To that end they retreated, in the dead of night, to the hotel Bazett had checked into at the beginning of her stay in Fuyuki. She knew that she would have to relocate- She didn't know how long she would have until Kotomine learned she was alive, and wanted to avoid a fight with him until she was fully recovered- but she hoped that the two of them had at least one night to rest.

"Right, right..." Amy muttered, "And...there's this contest between 'Mages' that involve summoning magic ghosts...?"

"Close enough."

Against all of the training she received at the Mage's Association, Bazett filled Amy in on the Holy Grail War, if only to answer her questions about Bazett's injuries. While she knew it was a risky measure, she felt she owed the pink hedgehog something for saving her life. What's more, Amy would better appreciate the need to remain hidden if she knew what lurked in the shadows. It would be easier to hide Amy if the red-skirted hedgehog girl was willing to play along. In return, Amy had regaled Bazett with the tale of how she appeared in this world. A week ago, the enforcer would have found the story hard to swallow. Regrowing an arm while inches away from death's icy grip had done wonders for her suspension of disbelief.

Amy put down her cup. "Okay. So, where do we go to find that Kotomine guy?"

Bazett blinked. "What?"

"Your friend was taken away by this guy, wasn't he?" Amy asked, "So, if you want him back, we just gotta..." She lifted a large mallet up and slug over her shoulder. "...Give him what-for!"

Where did she get that hammer!? Bazett tried to get a hold of her thoughts and the direction of the conversation. "That...that's very nice of you to offer, but Kotomine is a dangerous man. He used to be an executor for the Church's Burial Agency," That got a blank look from Amy. "That's the branch that specializes in killing vampires."

"Oh, cool."

Bazett felt a headache. "The *point* is, he's not someone you can just swing a large hammer at. He's a skilled combatant."

"Oh, don't worry about me," Amy twirled her hammer. "I've got a few adventures under my belt. This gal's taken down more than her fair share of killer robots. How hard could one kung-fu priest be?"

You'd be surprised. Bazett thought, and said, "Look, I can handle Kotomine on my own. You don't need-"

"Sure I do!" Amy cut off, "We're friends, aren't we?"

Bazett was stunned. *How...how can she say that so easily? We've known each other for less than a day!* Trying to suppress a headache, she said, "But what about those other friends you told me about? Don't you want to find them first?"

"I do, but they can take care of themselves! Those guys eat robot armies for breakfast!" Amy boasted, and gave Bazett a concerned look. "But, this Kotomine guy almost killed you, right? Sounds like you could use some help!"

"He caught me off-guard." Bazett muttered.

"And just think how much harder that'll be if you had someone to watch your back!" Amy added without missing a beat.

As she looked in Amy Rose's eyes, Bazett realized that nothing short of hypnosis would convince her new companion to stay in the room and out of trouble. And Bazett had already tried hypnosis earlier; Amy's natural spell-resistance was higher than what Bazett could cast, due to either the latter's recent brush with death, and the former being from another dimension. Had she been a researcher, Bazett would have been intrigued, and determined to dissect Amy and discover her secrets. But there was no time for that.

Sighing, Bazett said, "Fine...you can come help. But you need to follow my instructions." *At least this way I can keep an eye on her. I just hope this doesn't implode on me...*

Amy nodded. "You won't regret this, Bazett. We'll beat this evil priest, get your friend back, and then find my man Sonic!"

"Just like that?" Bazett asked wryly.

"You know it! In fact..." Amy began to look thoughtful, "I wouldn't be surprised if Sonic's already taken Kotomine down."

"He's been taken down?" Dr. Eggman asked.

Things had been going very smoothly aboard the *Egg Saucer* . Under Eggman's supervision (Which mostly consisted of him yelling at robots), all of the essential repairs had been completed. While the mobile base was unlikely to take the skies yet, it was also unlikely to sink under the water. And now that the crucial components had been fixed, Eggman could send his remaining Badniks out to collect more animals to turn into robots.

Then he learn that Arms wasn't coming back.

"Yes, sir," Orbot replied, staring at his computer terminal. "According to this readout, Arms is no longer functioning."

"Hmm," Eggman rubbed his chin in thought. "That's odd. None of the news reports mentioned that. You'd think someone would notice a giant robot being destroyed."

"Maybe they're saving that for sweeps?" Cubot suggested.

"News networks don't have sweeps!" Eggman snarled, and pointed dramatically at Orbot. "Where did Arms crash, Orbot?"

Orbot typed. "This is where Arms' signal ceased, sir."

On the larger screen, a map of Fuyuki City appeared. In one section, a glowing dot appeared. The computer zoomed in on the section, showing a detailed layout of Homurahara Academy. Before the main building was a flashing icon that resembled Eggman's head. Unlike the other emblems that were printed on the doctor's machines, this one was crying.

Eggman clasped his fingers evilly. "So...the Chaos Emerald is *there*, eh?"

"Well, actually, we don't know if there's an Emerald..." Orbot began, but was cut off by Eggman leaping to his feet.

"With the vital repairs to the *Egg Saucer* complete, there is nothing to keep me here!" Eggman declared, gesturing erratically. "I will go forth and bring home the prize! We leave at once!"

"Weren't we gonna watch monster movies tonight?" Cubot asked, "I already made the popcorn like you ordered me to."

Eggman looked down and saw a large bowl of popcorn had been placed next to his command chair. The smell of melted butter reached his nostrils, unhampered by the mustache. After a moment's thought, Eggman sat back down and picked up the bowl.

"Okay, we leave *tomorrow* ." The mad doctor decided between mouthfuls of popcorn.

As the house lights dimmed, the largest screen lit up. A woman's voice was then heard speaking.

"Coming up on the obscure movie channel, *Attack of the Evil Robots From Another Dimension* !"

"How prophetic!" Eggman chortled, spitting out a few half-chewed kernels.

Orbot sighed and picked up a brush and dustpan. "I hate it when he talks with his mouth full."

TO BE CONTINUED

Tiger Dojo:

Taiga: Rising from the sea! Descending from the skies! It's the Tiger Dojo! Welcome back, children! Fujimura Taiga- *sensei* , presiding!

Illya: (*Wearing a bandage*) And the Number One Student, Illya! Ugh...my head hurts...

Taiga: Are you all right, Illya- *chan* ? That was a nasty bump you got in the main story, after all.

Illya: No, I'm fine! A little thing like this won't keep me from saving the people from your half-assed education!

Taiga: Very good, Number One Student, very- Wait, that was an insult! (*Hits Illya*)

Illya: Awk! You monster, striking an injured woman...!

Taiga: Our first question comes from Vladimir-Spider. "Question about Shirou's tracing, will he be able to trace the rings? Even if they aren't swords, he is still able to trace pretty much everything, though

swords are easier for him. Same comes to Chaos Emeralds. I mean, if Shirou is able to trace Caliburn, which supposedly holds the amount of power far exceeding his own, then I think tracing any object is not a problem for him."

Illya: I doubt *Onii-chan* could do anything like that. We have no idea what Chaos Emeralds or Power Rings really are, after all

Taiga: As for Projecting Caliburn, it was a bit easier for Shirou because his origin is Sword, having contained Avalon for ten years. Our next question is from Element-Overlord. Huh? Didn't this guy write to us before?

Illya: "Would it be possible for Shirou to get a form like Super Sonic?" Boy, a lot of people are sure interested in *Onii-chan* all of a sudden. Doesn't anyone care about this adorable heroine?

Taiga: Huh! A Super Shirou, hmm? Such a thing could be possible, if all seven Emeralds were found. However! While we cannot confirm nor deny the possibility of a Super Shirou appearing, I do have a picture of a Super Illya right here!

Illya: Really? Let me- Hey, what is this!? This is just Prisma Illya, and someone drew a yellow fireball around her!

Taiga: That's all of the time we have left for now. Please give us your support as we await the next chapter! Good bye!

To The Beginning

Chapter 4: *To The Beginning*

Shirou woke up, feeling surprisingly energetic. He wasn't sure why. After the roller coaster of madness and excitement that was the entirety of last night, he figured he'd be too exhausted to get up, much less make breakfast.

If only Saber could bounce back as quickly, He thought, Then again, she did more legwork than me. It's unreasonable of me to assume she could recover like I can.

As he entered the kitchen, he found himself wondering just why he was recovering so quickly. The night before he had narrowly survived being cleaved in two and, a little later, almost being disemboweled. Both times he managed to regenerate his flesh, without even a scar to show for it. Being impaled by Lancer at the school was different; The pendent he found at the scene indicated that some Magecraft-using samaritan had healed him.

Did whoever cast the spell give him a new power? Or did being in so many life and death situations cause latent abilities to awaken? Both possibilities were unlikely, given what Shirou knew about magic; although his knowledge on that subject was less than basic, at best.

"Need help, master chef?" A voice from below his side asked.

Oh, it's Sonic, Shirou thought automatically. Aloud, he said, "I'm fine, I can do this by myself."

Then, Shirou's head caught up with the rest of him. He whirled about and looked down at Sonic. The hedgehog was now seated at the table, which Shirou was sure hadn't been set the last time he looked. Sonic gave Shirou a cheeky wave, grinning just as cheekily.

" *Ohayo gozaimasu,* " Sonic greeted.

"Why- why are out in the open? When did you get back!?" Shirou stammered, his mind reeling with every possibly bad end Sonic's appearance would result in.

"Just after you guys went to bed. Speaking of which-" Sonic jerked a thumb towards the halls. "-How come Saber's having a slumber party? I thought she had to stay hidden, too."

Oh, that. Unlike Sonic, Shirou and Saber weren't lucky enough to sneak in unnoticed. Taiga had caught them the minute they appeared in the neighborhood, upset that Shirou had been out so long- because that meant dinner was late. At first, it seemed as if Shirou could abate his big sis figure's anger by cooking, but his hopes for an easy reconciliation were dashed when 'the Tiger' noticed Saber. Over Taiga's furious accusations that Shirou had been "Fooling around", the Emiya Mage had been forced to claim that Saber was a former friend of Kiritsugi's from abroad, and that she had come to town to offer Shirou aid. It wasn't a bad lie, given his long-dead step-father's habit of leaving Japan for weeks at a time, and Saber adjusted to the falsehood quite well.

That said, Taiga wasn't going to let Saber into the household that easily, and challenged the Servant to a duel. The idea was to test the foreigner's ability to protect Shirou from danger, but the Mage felt that his teacher just wanted to intimidate Saber into leaving- a ploy that was doomed to fail. Even winded, Saber was a Heroic Spirit with abilities beyond normal humans, and had lived and died by the sword. The match was over in seconds, which was when Sakura insisted on 'testing' this new girl. Luckily, Shirou managed to defuse the situation somewhat before Saber could cut his underclassman's bow in half. After dinner, Taiga refused to go home, asserting that it was wrong to leave an unmarried couple alone in a big house, and also refused to let Sakura leave as well, given the attacks. The result was all three girls sharing a bedroom, as Taiga didn't want to take the chance of one of them sneaking into Shirou's.

Once Shirou finished the story, Sonic raised an eyebrow. "Does that mean I can come out of hiding?"

"No!" Shirou turned back to his cooking, "Saber can pass for a normal human. You can't."

"What if I wear a disguise?"

"A disguise?" Shirou repeated. His mind was suddenly besieged by an image. It consisted of a tiny person, his entire body wrapped in an oversized trench coat, with a comically large fedora on top. A pair of red sneakers sticking out from the bottom completely the look. It was also completely ridiculous.

"Sure," Sonic said, and Shirou could practically hear the grin. "A cowboy hat, a fake mustache, and even my mom wouldn't recognize me!"

"No, no, and no," Shirou responded, "I know you're not being serious. I'm sorry, but-" Shirou then heard footsteps. "Someone's coming! Hide!"

The words were barely out of Shirou's mouth when he heard the tale-tell whoosh, a sign that Sonic was in motion& and hopefully out of sight.

Last night had been terrible for Sakura. Not just because Taiga caught Shirou with Saber- Saber, her senpai, the city's worst Mage, had summoned the best Servant- but also because of the sleep. It wasn't that she had slept in Shirou's house. If anything, being in his house for so long was a dream. Having to share a room with two others- Taiga's loud snoring in particular- was only mild annoyance compared to the true terror now living in her shadow.

Avenger.

Unlike other Servants, Avenger did not seek battles, or even victims to feed off of. It was unlikely that Avenger needed to feed at all, given its connection to her. What Avenger did do was talk. A lot. Incessantly. Of death, and destruction. It spoke of the tortures it

received in life, and what kind Sakura should inflict on the world. It was easier to ignore in the day, when the sounds of the outside world gave Sakura something else to focus on. But at night-

Hey, do you hear something? Avenger broke into her thoughts.

As Sakura entered the kitchen, she could have sworn that she heard a rush of movement. Looking around, she saw Shirou standing at the stove. He seemed tense. She noticed that one of the pillows around the table had an impression in them, indicating that someone was sitting there.

Crud, looks like we missed seeing his pet familiar. Avenger sighed mentally.

"Good morning, senpai." Sakura greeted softly, doing her best to ignore Avenger.

"Good morning, Sakura," Shirou returned, and his face showed concern. "Did you get enough sleep last night? You look, um..."

Sakura realized that she must have had bags under her eyes. Of course, she had spent the night more awake in order to better ignore Avenger. "I- I'm fine. Sensei snores, that's all."

Shirou chuckled, and Sakura felt her heart lighten. Moments like this, she would not give up for the world. It almost made her forget how horrible her life was.

I wonder how long he's going to pretend everything's all right, Avenger thought, I mean, it's kinda sad how hard he's trying to delude himself. Not like he's fooling anyone. How long do you think it'll be before he dies?

'Almost', being personified by Avenger. Sakura went to help Shirou with the cooking, and it wasn't long before Taiga and Saber joined them for breakfast. As they ate, Avenger continued to do a running commentary. Sakura tried to keep the weird Servant's thoughts out

of her head, and found herself recalling what Avenger had said about Saber last night...

Well, well, well... *Avenger had thought*, Look who's back a for a second try... So that's two from the Fourth...

Did that mean that someone in the last Grail War had summoned this specific Saber? And who was the other one of the two? Was it another Servant? Or had a Master who survived the Fourth Heaven's Feel returned? No matter how many times she tried to glean more information, Avenger just remained vague.

" *Oraa!* " Taiga yelled suddenly, and threw her chopsticks at the window. Everyone jumped as wood broke glass.

Whoa, Zecchan's leveled up. Avenger remarked.

"What is it, Funji-nee?" Shirou asked worriedly.

"There was a weird face peeking in!" Taiga yelled, getting up.

As the Tiger of Fuyuki raced outside, the Tora Shina inexplicably in hand, both Shirou and Saber winced. It looked like Sonic couldn't keep himself hidden after all. They, along with Sakura, went outside and joined Taiga. Their excitable teacher was looking about anxiously, her trademark weapon ready to be unleashed.

"I'm telling you, there was someone here!" She yelled, "Some peeping tom spying on us!"

"Maybe... maybe it was an animal of some kind..." Shirou suggested weakly.

"No! This pervert had a human face!" Taiga insisted, "I know it!"

Saber glanced up and saw Sonic peeking down from the roof. She sent him a glare that, enhanced by his Rank B charisma, actually made the normally easy-going and very cocky Hedgehog cringe.

She also noticed a pair of chopsticks sticking out of his mouth, and shook her head.

At the Tohsaka Mansion, Tails sat on the couch as he fiddled with the Miles Electric. He paused, yawned, and got back to work. He was so fixated on his computer that he didn't notice Archer materializing right next to him.

"Good morning." The Servant greeted.

Tails jumped slightly. "Whoa! Hey, Archer. Didn't hear you come in. But I guess that's to be expected from a magic ghost."

"Yeah, I'll try to be louder when I enter a room," Archer replied, "I see Sonic decided not to stay." He had been on watch when Tails and Sonic returned to the mansion. Before he could wake Rin up, he rushed off, disappearing into the night.

"Yeah, big mansions aren't really his thing," Tails said, "Plus, he said he wanted 'protect his new Genesis' whatever that means. He went back to Shirou's."

And avoiding getting put under hypnosis, too, Archer thought, Rin's not going to take that well. "You're not planning on going anywhere, are you?"

Tails shook his head. "Not unless I have to. I'm super-bushed. You're not going to believe what happened last night."

Before Archer could ask, the two of them were interrupted by an ominous sound. It was the sound of feet being dragged across the floor, and carried with it a dark aura. Tohsaka Rin, the Mage Association's representative in Fuyuki, descendent of Tohsaka Nagato, lurched into the room. Her face bore an expression of death. There was utterly no life in her arms, the useless limbs just swung in the air as she stepped. Tails and Archer watched as Rin forced herself towards the kitchen. Once she was out of sight, they heard

refrigerator door being opened, followed by the sound of something going 'glug-glug-glug'.

"Is- is that normal?" Tails asked, watching. "Did something happen to you guys too?"

"Yes, and yes," Archer answered, "Looks like it's been a busy night for both of us."

The two of them swapped stories of what happened when they separated. Archer was stunned, and not about Illya. On the contrary, he had a feeling that the robot attack would draw out a Servant or two. No, what bothered him was what Tails claimed Shirou had done during their encounter with Berserker.

If what he's saying is true, then it sounds like Shirou's starting to get into Projection, the Bowman thought, Dammit... so much is happening so quickly I can barely keep up.

And to Archer's annoyance, Tails didn't seem very perturbed about Knuckles. In fact, the two-tailed fox was actually laughing!

"Yeah, sorry about Knuckles," Tails chuckled, "It's weird- the same happened when Sonic and I first met him, too."

"What do you mean?" Archer asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, Eggman met Knuckles first and told him that we were jewel thieves, or something," Tails explained, rubbing the back of his head. "He spent most of the time trying to trip us up as we explored his island."

"But you and he are friends now, aren't you?" Archer asked, "How'd you get him to calm down?"

"Well, he switched gears when he caught Eggman stealing the Master Emerald, the giant jewel that keeps Angel Island floating." Tails replied.

The more I learn, the more questions I have. Instead of asking the obvious, Archer pressed on. "I don't think we want to wait that long to prove our innocence. We need to get him on our side now."

"Well, me and Sonic will tell him you're okay if we see him," Tails said, "But if you guys run into him again... Hold that thought."

Tails got up and left the house. After watching him go, Archer decided that he had put off making breakfast long enough. After everything that had happened, he needed to do something relaxing. Archer had always enjoyed housework, even back when he was alive. As he cooked at the stove, the bowman glanced at Rin out of the corner of his eye. The young Mage was lying face down on her table, doing a very good impression of a freshly-murdered corpse.

"Are you okay?" Archer asked, partially concerned, but mostly out of obligation. He knew that Rin was just overreacting.

"I couldn't sleep last night," Rin said, looking up. "I kept having robot nightmares."

"Oh?"

"You know that American movie about the killer robot from the future? The one starring the German guy?" Rin asked, "It was like that. People's skins kept melting off, becoming robots."

"I'm pretty sure the robots we'll have to deal with are too big to be mistaken for people, Rin." Archer noted.

"Just make breakfast." Rin grunted, looking annoyed.

Archer went back to cooking, a faint smile on his face. It seemed like Rin was regaining some of her spark. That was good. So many abnormalities(And yes, Mages had to use the term themselves) had happened, and Archer was worried that his Master would just give up.

Just as Archer was finishing up, Tails came into the kitchen. He had something in his hand, but Archer couldn't tell what it was. The little outsider took his seat at the table, his cheerful demeanor presenting a contrast to the gloomy but burning Mage sitting across from him.

"Good morning, Rin," Tails greeted, a bit hesitantly.

Rin sighed and straightened up. "Good morning, Tails."

Tails smiled, glad to see Rin was in a better mood. "Archer told me that you two ran into Knuckles last night?"

Rin nodded. "Yes. That jerk tried to kill us!"

Tails grimaced. "Yeah, sorry about that. But I've got something that can help," He held out his hand. Resting in the palm was another wrist-communicator. "Here, put this on."

Confused, Rin picked up the communicator and held it up to her face for further scrutinization. She looked back to Tails for explanation.

"Me and Sonic are wearing the same type of communicator," Tails explained, "If you see Knuckles, you can just call us and we'll explain everything to him. Here, let me show you how it works... "

As Tails ran Rin through the tutorial, Archer felt a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. He knew his Master was terrible with electronics. She couldn't handle anything more complicated than a basic calculator. She had been born of a clan of 'old school' Mages, and raised to embody their ideals; and one of those ideals was 'Mages didn't need technology.' After all, if you could cast illusions or throw fireballs, why in the world would you need something like a personal computer? It was stubbornness, plain and simple. The most powerful magics were the oldest and most mysterious. Ergo, some bright (For a very loose and generous meaning of the term) spark came to the conclusion that the more a Mage ignored the advancements of modern civilization, the more powerful a Mage they were. The end result was a Clock Tower full of people who not only

underestimated the uses modern machines had, but some who had no idea what they were. He recalled hearing stories of how his father spent a successful career as a 'Mage Killer' using modern weaponry to take 'Proper' Mages by surprise.

"...Okay, let's test you out," Tails walked out of the room. "In five seconds, try to call me on line 2."

"All right& " Rin muttered, staring at the not-a-watch on her wrist in apprehension. After a few moments, she pushed a button. "Hello? Tails?"

"Haha, you got it!" Tails' voice came from the watch's speaker. "Good! So, whenever you need me or Sonic, just give us a call."

"Let's hope it never comes to that." Rin muttered.

"Hey, the way you talk, it seems like you don't like us!" Sonic's voice chirped up.

Rin's eyebrows shot up. So did Archer's, but only for his right eye.

"Rin, you must have hit the party line!" Tails cried, "Quick, hit the options switch to push Sonic out!"

"You mean I wasn't invited?" Sonic asked teasingly, "That's mean... "

As Rin fumbled with the communicator, Archer sighed. Hopeless. Nothing short of hopeless.

The walk to school was nothing short of awkward. Most guys would have jumped to take Shirou's place. The very stupid kind. Other, smarter men would have realized just what a tense situation the teenaged Mage had been placed in, and swore to avoid it at all costs.

At Shirou's left, his underclassman Sakura. She had her head down, which didn't hide the bleak expression on her face, or the bags under her eyes. Shirou had suggested that she call in sick, given how tired she seemed, but the girl had refused. He would have called Taiga's attention to Sakura's condition, but his excitable teacher had run off the minute breakfast had ended. As they strolled, Shirou couldn't help but feel a faint pit form somewhere in his soul. It was...familiar. Like something he had felt before, but could not consciously remember.

Of course, this did not distract him from the pretty girl walking alongside his right. Saber was as stone-faced as she had ever been as she walked. She had the gait that was somewhere between relaxed and serious, no doubt on guard for any potential attacks that might occur. Shirou had wanted her to stay back and keep Sonic out of trouble (His fooling around with his wrist-communicator had almost exposed himself), but Saber insisted on coming. The robot attack and the encounters with Rider and Berserker the previous night had convinced his Servant that letting Shirou out of her sight was a Very Stupid Thing To Do. And now that her existence had been revealed to Taiga and Sakura, Saber decided that hiding was now pointless as well. It was more than likely that Taiga had told the entire school about the 'strange girl Shirou brought him'. The man in question could only hope most would dismiss it as more of the Tiger's meaningless babble.

But as they approached Homurahara Academy, it became apparent that 'meaningless babble', would be the least on anyone's minds. Police cars, construction vehicles and even news vans filled the front courtyard. Investigators, workers, and reporters were everywhere. Onlookers, consisting of mostly of students, crowded around to see what the big deal was.

"What's going on...?" Sakura asked, confused.

"Emiya! Hey, Shirou!" a voice called out.

Both Shirou and Sakura froze, for one very good reason.

It was Shinji.

With his usual cocky smile on, Sakura's older brother strode up to the three of them. That smile twitched when he saw how close together his little sister and Shirou were standing. It was no secret between the three of them that Shinji's estrangement from Shirou began when the red-head started to have suspicions of just what happened at the Matou Manor, combined with Shinji's distaste for Sakura spending so much time at the Emiya estate. But when he got a look at Saber, Shinji's eyes brightened.

"Well, well? Who is this? A friend of yours, Shirou?" Shinji asked, looking Saber over. "I didn't know you liked blonds."

"It's not like that," Shirou said, "She's just a friend of my step-father who's visiting. Her name is Saber."

Shinji hummed thoughtfully. Before he could ask another (Undoubtably embarrassing) question, a loud metallic screech followed by a crash caught their attention. Shinji glanced at it, then turned his attention back to Saber. But within those scant seconds she, along with Shirou and Sakura, had stepped around him to get a better look at the ruckus. Shinji gritted his teeth and followed after.

As it turned out, the center of all the action was none other than Arms. Men and women in uniform were crawling all around it, either examining the robot's scrap, or taking pieces away. The noise had been caused by a large metal plate falling off. Police that weren't taking (Or answering) questions were busy trying to keep onlookers from getting too close. One very important-looking officer was talking to a reporter, declining to voice any theories until the investigation was complete, and yes, they will issue an official statement as soon as possible.

In hindsight, Shirou should not have been surprised that something like this was happening. After all, it was completely foolish to assume that the remains of a giant robot would be swept under the rug. No doubt some teacher, student, or even a passerby noticed the

wreckage and called the authorities. He was just used to the after-effects of a battle being immediately covered up. Luckily, there was no way a giant robot could break the secrecy of Magecraft. It was unusual, but not beyond mundane explanation.

"Where- where did this come from...?" Sakura asked, staring at the machine.

Shinji chose that moment to step up, his arms crossed. "I know, it's crazy, right? On top of Ayako almost being raped-"

"What was that?" Shirou whirled at Shinji in shock. Besides him he could hear Sakura and Saber also turning.

Shinji scratched the back of his head. "Apparently, some lowlife snuck into the school after classes and assaulted a few girls," He explained, "From what I hear, Mitsuzuri's the only one to get away unharmed."

Shirou instantly realized that Shinji was referring to the victims of Rider's feeding. In all of the excitement surrounding Eggman's robots, as well as Berserker's assault last night, he had completely forgotten that there were other threats in the city. He risked a glance at Saber, and saw from her stone faced expression that she didn't forget.

"Umm, *Nii-san* , do you know who the culprit is?" Sakura asked timidly.

Shinji gave his sister a glance before turning back to Shirou. "Not a clue. I think Ayako's under some non-disclosure thing from the police," He snickered. "I hear it's because she claims a tanuki saved her, or whatever."

Sonic!

Shirou resisted the urge to groan openly. Of course Ayako would have seen Sonic- the Hedgehog admitted to saving someone from

Rider, didn't he? And naturally, Ayako would have to tell someone about her miraculous encounter. On one hand, he was happy that Sonic had managed to save another life. On the other, his actions were yet another tear in the veil of secrecy that Mages everywhere hid behind. At this rate, the existence of Magecraft would be common knowledge by the end of the school year.

I wonder if Tohsaka's heard of this, Shirou thought as Shinji blathered on, No, she probably hasn't yet. She'd be going after Sonic with murderous intent if she had.

I'm going to kill him, Rin thought as she listened to Ayako recounted her chance encounter with near-death for the umpteenth time, I swear, the next time I see that Hedgehog, I won't even bother with hypnosis. I'll just shoot a Gandr into that big mouth.

While Rin should have been happy that a classmate had been saved, part of her really wished that Sonic had done it in a way that kept Ayako from, oh, I don't know, seeing him.

"...He didn't really look like a tanuki, honestly," Ayako told another girl, one from the Archery club. "He was blue- and had big spikes sticking out of the back of his head... "

Faster than the speed of sound, yet slow enough to be seen. Rin thought bitterly. She would have altered Ayako's memories right then and there, but didn't see the point. Even if she had hypnotized the archery club president into recanting her claims, the story of the 'Blue Tanuki' were already circulating the city, thanks to the news report about Lancer.

"But, still, I wonder who that woman was," Saegusa Yukika commented, "Do you really think she's the one who attacked the other girls?"

"That's what the police think." Ayako replied.

"Shouldn't be too hard to find," Makidera Kaede decided, "I mean, someone with long, purple hair should stand out, right?"

"Unless it's a wig..." Ayako said thoughtfully.

As the girls chattered, Rin rested her head on her desk, and tried to stave off the headaches with happy visions of a certain blue hero's head exploding. They were hauntingly therapeutic. She tried to console herself with the knowledge that at the very least Sonic was confined to the Emiya property, with Saber to watch him.

Just as the pleasing image of Sonic chained to a wall, with Saber on guard appeared in her mind, another classmate rushed into the room with the newest piece of gossip.

"Hey! Emiya just brought a blonde, foreign girl to school!"

Tohsaka Rin, Master of Archer, shook as she resisted the urge to scream.

Shirou sneezed.

"Bless you, *senpai*. "

Shirou rubbed his nose. He hoped he wasn't coming down with something. After surviving certain death so many times, it would have been really awkward if a common cold did him in. Unless it was those brushes with death that were weakening his immune system.

Saber must have thought the same. "Shirou, are you well?"

"I'm fine, you guys." Shirou lied.

Well, it wasn't a complete lie. Physically, Shirou was fine. Emotionally, he was in a bad way. He could hear, no, feel, all of the speculation surrounding his new companion. The strange and stunned looks were only their faces. Although they were spoken very

quietly, words like "Arm candy" and "New girlfriend" fluttered from the student body as the three of them stepped through the halls. Thanks to Shinji, the whole school probably thought Shirou had a secret lover he was only now showing off. Whenever Shirou tried to correct those gutsy enough to approach and ask for more juicy tidbits that Saber was only a recent friend he made, (A not untrue claim) the rumor mill would grind his words to dust, and got people thinking he was simply a 'fast operator.' It was too much attention, and for all of the wrong reasons. He wanted to leave Saber at the entrance, but she insisted on following. Shirou considered trying to pass her off as a new transfer student, but realized what a worthless excuse that was. Even if he could forge the right paperwork, few people would actually believe it now.

Eventually, he and Sakura had to separate for their respective classes. As they bid farewell, Shirou saw out of the corner of his eye that Sakura was shaking a bit. His concern for her went up, but before he could act on these feelings, he bumped into someone.

"Oh, excuse me." Shirou said automatically, and looked at who he had collided with.

The man in front of him was an adult, perhaps a few years older than Taiga. He had blonde hair that, while combed neatly, hung down on his head. He wore a green coat over his clothes, a snappy turtleneck and vest combo. He also had glasses. Shirou recognized him as Stuart-san, an assistant teacher that just recently started working at the school.

"It's all right," Stuart said, brushing himself off. "No harm done. Just be more careful, next time, Emiya- *kun* ."

"I will."

Stuart's eyes drifted, and to Shirou's suppressed exasperation they landed on Saber. "And who might this be? A new transfer student?"

"N-no," Shirou quickly began introductions. "This is Saber, a friend of my father's I've met recently. Saber, this is Mr. Stuart, a member of the faculty."

"It is a pleasure to meet you." Saber said cordially.

"The pleasure is all mine," Stuart said, "Do you live around here, Saber? I've just moved in myself."

"No," Saber replied, "I'm only visiting, to help Shirou during these difficult times."

"Hmm. Do you mean these strange attacks...or that giant machine out front?" Stuart asked.

"...I don't understand what you mean." Saber said after a moment.

Stuart shrugged. "Oh, it's nothing. I'm a bit jealous, actually. Emiya-kun has a cute lady like you watching out for him."

"Well...I need to get to class," Shirou said, and took that moment to walk very quickly ahead and away. "Saber, I'll see you after school, all right?"

"Shirou-!" Saber began to walk after him. As she followed after her Master, she didn't notice how narrow Stuart's eyes had become, staring intently at her retreating back.

Tails sat down besides the *Tornado* and wiped his brow. He was taking a break from the repair work, a job made somewhat easier thanks to the salvaged parts Archer brought back. It wasn't a very good job, however. While the pieces of metal were great for repairing the wings and hull, Tails wasn't so eager to use any of the circuit boards for the bi-plane's computers. Without a proper computer of his own, there was no way to double-check the software for bugs or (Knowing Eggman) virus'. This meant that there was a fairly large pile of parts lying in the yard. That was no good. From what Archer

had said in the morning, Rin had not been pleased that her Servant had brought it all to her mansion. She had only allowed it under the belief that since Tails probably needed all of it for the repairs, the big stuff would be gone. That was understandable. No one liked having a pile of junk in their back yard. But Tails couldn't use most of it for the *Tornado* - he wished he had Archer's help hiding it.

And then an idea came to mind. Tails reached into his gloves and pulled out the Power Ring Sonic lent him. While it would provide him with protection, if he lost it after being struck the gold loop would be gone forever. Tails pulled out the Miles Electric and began to search the files kept within its data banks. Eventually, he found the one he was looking for.

Ring Synthesis

By Sir Charles the Hedgehog

Tails examined the thesis, glancing back at the parts every now and then. Yeah, this could work. And if it did, none of them would have to worry about running out of Power Rings. Especially if they couldn't find a Special Zone...

I can't do this anymore... Sakura thought miserably.

What's wrong, Master? Avenger asked, his thoughts laced with malevolence. *Have you found someone you would like me to kill?*

Sakura sighed. Sitting in class, she attempted to focus on the lecture, but found that difficult. The word around the school was that a purple-haired woman was the one who attacked the girls last night. Even Sakura couldn't force herself to ignore the very real truth of the matter.

Rider. Rider was the culprit.

At a young age, Sakura's magical talents were very obvious. And so, it was equally obvious that she would be the focus of Zouken's twisted upbringing. Before she was even ten years old, she had been made to suffer. Violated in every form of the word, the young girl had been forced to absorb the Matou's Magecraft, regardless of the pain it caused her. And then there was her brother. When Shinji found out that Sakura, not he, was to become the Matou's heir, his familial love twisted into a fierce envy and hatred. He abused her, and Sakura, already numb from Zouken's 'training', did nothing to fight back. And in a way, she pitied him, for she knew his attitude stemmed from the despair of being ignored by his family. Shinji's father, she knew, barely paid him much mind, and Zouken had written the boy off as useless years ago. In such a household, how else could he turn out? And so she took it, as she knew there was no escape.

And when the Holy War began, Zouken forced Sakura to summon a Servant of her own, Rider. Sakura knew little of the Holy Grail, save that it granted a wish to whichever Master and Servant remained. Sakura wanted no part in it, but could not resist Zouken's commands.

Which was when Shinji came in. He convinced Zouken to have Sakura turn control of Rider over to him, and that he would win the Holy Grail for the Matou's. Zouken agreed, as he cared little about how the prize was won. Sakura felt sorry a bit for Rider, but she didn't think she could handle the stress of being a Master. Learning that Rider had been feeding on her classmates was a little jarring—not it should have been. There was no way her brother could supply Rider with the necessary Mana. The real question was...who made the decision to do so? The concern burned away at Sakura, and it was one more pain she could barely handle.

Should I kill that guy in blue hair? Your brother, I mean?

Of course, it would be easier if Avenger wasn't around. The gossip going around the school had only made him more obnoxious, and

more bloodthirsty, apparently. Sakura wanted to be rid of the shadowy creature, but...

If you wish for me to be off, then, of course, I shall obey... Avenger whispered.

Sakura jolted slightly. The most aggravating thing about Avenger was that he seemed to be in direct contact with her thoughts. The only place where she felt even the slightest bit of peace was within her head, where the tender memories of her early childhood were. When the pain of her present state grew too strong, she would think back to a time when her life had not been an endless parade of suffering. But with Avenger, even that sanctuary was lost.

But what else am I to do? Avenger asked, *I must remain by my Master's side, and ensure her safety.*

You...you do not need to be so close, Sakura thought back, *I am in no danger...*

Is that so? Then, do I have your permission to explore this world? To hunt?

Could it really be that simple? *If- If I give you permission, would you stop following me around?*

Thanks to their mental bond, Sakura could feel Avenger nod in confirmation. While it wouldn't solve the problem entirely, the idea of putting some distance between her and her new 'Servant' made Sakura- well, not entirely happy- she hadn't really felt that way in over ten years- but it lifted her spirits slightly.

You know, those kind of thoughts aren't going to help my self-confidence. Avenger grumbled.

"Sakura?"

Sakura was pulled from her mental conversation by a voice in the real world. Standing besides her was Ayako's younger brother, Minori. She soon realized that besides him, she was the only person left sitting in the classroom.

"Mm, class is over." He said a bit awkwardly.

"...Thank you." Sakura replied, just as awkwardly.

For a moment, it looked like Minori wanted to say something, but all he did was shuffle out of the room, tossing Sakura an anxious glance over his shoulder. Once he was gone, Avenger materialized from the shadows. It was the first time he did so since first appearing two nights ago. In the daylight, he seemed even more sinister. His black body had an unearthly purple glow to it, faint but noticeable.

"I think he likes you." Avenger said, nodding at the door where Minori had gone.

"What?" Sakura blinked. Where did that come from?

"Never mind. So, is this it? I can go?" Avenger asked, almost eagerly.

There was a hunger in his tone that Sakura didn't like. "Yes. But- would you try not to attack anybody?"

Avenger tilted his head down slightly, almost sulking. "Are you sure about that?"

"Yes," Sakura affirmed, half-pleadingly. "I don't want you hurting any of the people." She knew asking Avenger not to fight at all was out of the question- all Servants brought into the world desired battle- but at the very least she could keep innocent bystanders from getting caught in the crossfire. That's something Shirou would do, after all.

For a moment, Avenger didn't answer. Then, lifting his spherical head, he said, "Just to be clear. Your orders are that I cannot harm

any of the people- is that it?"

A bit confused by his inflictions, Sakura nodded. That blood-red smile appeared again, sending shivers up Sakura's spine.

"I understand completely, Master." Avenger said, and his form shrank into the ground, becoming a silhouette. The shadow slinked off, crawling up the wall and out the window, squeezing through the smallest space between the building and glass. Watching him go, Sakura couldn't help but wonder if she had done something terrible.

So far, the day had not been as bad as Shirou had thought it would be. Despite the occasional odd look, Saber's presence did not disrupt the day-to-day events of the school. The fact that she did not follow him into his classes probably helped. Good thing, too. Lessons would have been supremely awkward if she had.

"I am going to do a perimeter check, Shirou," Saber had told him, "I will meet up with you at your lunch break, so please exercise caution until then."

When lunchtime came around, Shirou realized that he didn't tell Saber that instead of the regular cafeteria, he typically had lunch in the student council room with his friend, Ryuudo Issei.

On his way there, however, he suddenly felt something. It wasn't a physical sensation, like stubbing a toe, or coming into contact with a patch of hot or cold air. This felt more like a magical presence. But it didn't feel like it belonged to a living creature, or even a Servant. There was something...off. An image flashed in his mind, that of an area covered in membranes, with people like decayed dolls.

Currently outside the school building, Shirou found himself drifting towards one of the tree's surrounding the campus. Once at the base, he found...something. It was a blood red pentagram of sorts, surrounded by a circle with obscure glyphs around the outside. On

the center was a symbol that resembled an explosion- or writing tentacles.

Shirou's first thought was to reach out and touch it, which he instantly decided was idiotic. His next, much more rational idea was to find Rin and have her take a look. She would have a better idea of this...thing was than he would.

Just as Shirou turned to go back into the school, his Command Seals became warm. He heard a footsteps approaching from behind. He turned around instantly, his body tensing.

Rider walked towards him, her luscious body swaying with each step. There was a slight breeze which caused her hair to wave like a sexy flag. None of this detracted from the very noticeable sense of menace her presence created.

"Please come with me," She said, "My Master wishes to speak with you."

Shirou's blood went cold. He almost summoned Saber with a Command Seal on reflex, but just barely stopped himself. The fact of the matter was that there was no way a human, even a Mage, could stand up to the power of a Servant. If Rider had wanted to kill him, she would have done so already, and Shirou would be dead before he even knew it. Furthermore, if he summoned his own Servant, their inevitable battle would draw more unnecessary attention, something no one wanted to risk. No matter where the fight took place, it would start a ruckus that would expose the War.

And so, walking as slowly as he could manage, Shirou followed Rider. He hoped that if he drew this out long enough, either Saber or Rin would notice his absence and come looking. Or maybe, since Rider was blind, he could sneak off without her noticing...

"Move faster, or I'll knock you out and drag you." Rider said without turning around.

...Or maybe his sensuous captor could become less patient and more 'pro-active.' As he quickened his pace, a single thought ran Shirou's mind.

Did Sonic the Hedgehog ever have days like this?

"Achoo!"

Sonic couldn't have sneezed at a worse time. He was just inches away from defeating Warhead and completing Vectorman. But Sonic was one hit-point from death with only one life left when it happened, and in the split second his eyes were closed, the screen had changed from that of a final boss battle to that of Vectorman falling apart in a black background. Sonic shut the Genesis off with a disgusted snort. He didn't feel like running the gamut again, and it probably wasn't good for his eyes.

Looking around the empty house, Sonic considered just going out to get a better lay of the land. The only times he had been in the city was at night, and he wanted to see what it looked like in daylight. After all, Saber wasn't around to play watch dog.

Maybe I could go see how Tails is... Sonic thought, After all, he's living in a mansion now. Wonder how well it stacks up to this place.

His mind made up, Sonic went into instant-acceleration.

Whump!

And instantly slipped on a pillow. Sonic's body slid across the well-mopped floor. He hit a bookshelf, jostling its contents. With a groan, Sonic pulled himself up.

"Ugh... wipe out," He muttered. Then a book fell on him. "Ouch!"

Shaking his head, Sonic glared at the offending tome. It looked normal enough, if not a bit heavy. His first thought was that it was a

spell book, but that concept was disregarded. The book looked too normal to be magical. The cover wasn't made from leather, and there was a distinct lack of mysterious symbols or ominous noises. The title wasn't even in Latin, a language Sonic had stereotypically associated with wizardry.

Kiritsugu

Shirou couldn't believe what he was seeing. After their encounter on school grounds, Rider had 'escorted' Shirou to the back of the academy. They purposely took a route that avoided other students and staff. Every time it a stray person would wander by, Rider would always have Shirou pulled into the shadows with a hand over his mouth to keep him quiet. Shirou briefly wondered if Rider could detect people as a power granted by the Grail, or if being blindfolded had heightened her senses. Either way, their little walk was unlikely to be interrupted.

They soon came upon a storage shed. Rider gestured towards the door.

"My Master is inside." She said.

Shirou swallowed, tensed, and went inside. There, most the sports gear usually kept inside had been removed. A card table had been set up, along with a lamp for light. All in all made the interior look like a low-budget office. But most shocking of all was who sat behind the table.

"Shinji?!" Shirou gasped. He thought he was seeing things, but there was no mistaking that obnoxious smirk.

"Yo, Emiya," Shinji greeted, "Rider didn't treat you too roughly, did you?"

Shirou heard footsteps, and knew that the Servant in question was entering the shed. Shirou gritted his teeth.

Shinji just laughed. "Relax, Emiya! You're not in any danger. Rider wouldn't hurt a fly while I'm around."

Shirou glanced behind him and frowned. "I wonder how Mitsuzuri-san and the other girls would react to that."

Shinji's smile fell a bit, and he nodded. "Looks like I'd better explain a few things.

"I didn't really intend to summon Rider. She just appeared one day. Being descended from a clan of Mages, it was only inevitable that I be dragged into this mess. I wasn't so sure about this 'Holy War' thing, but Rider assured me that I wouldn't have to do anything. She'd do all of the fighting."

Shirou looked at Rider, who was now standing impassively at the door. Maybe it was the blindfold, but she seemed even more emotionless than Saber.

"You've heard that some weak Masters have their Servants steal mana from people to power them up, right?" Shinji continued, "Well, Rider decided to do the same thing while I wasn't looking. She didn't kill anyone, but-

But they were pretty close to death, Shirou knew. Was Shinji trying to pass everything Rider had done as an innocent mistake?

"That's why I called you out here," Shinji said, "I can't say anything to Ayako or anyone else, but I want you to know that I'm sorry for Rider's behaviour. I used a Command Seal to keep her from doing it again."

Shirou wasn't so sure if a simple apology would suffice, but decided not to press the issue. At the very least, he now knew who Rider's Master was. He would have to talk with Tohsaka about this.

But Shinji wasn't done, apparently. "Now that we've got that out of the way, let's talk business," He said, "That cutie you brought to

school. She's your Servant, isn't she?"

"...Yeah." No point in denying it.

"Hmph, you're pretty gloomy, even though you've got a beautiful woman by your side," Shinji remarked sardonically, "But I guess some people can't handle the pressure of a War, huh? Maybe I can help with that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we should form an alliance," Shinji explained, "After all, we're friends. Neither of us asked to take part in this War. Why shouldn't we work together?"

Shirou didn't answer that. He stared at Shinji, trying to figure if his alleged friend was being sincere in his offer. Though neither of them noticed, Rider suddenly tilted her head in confusion.

"I understand if you're a bit intimidated," Shinji went on, "But I really don't want to be your enemy. Why don't I give some intel?"

"From what Rider tells me, there's now a powerful Boundary Field surrounding the Ryuudou Temple. Not only that, but there's now a weird samurai guarding the Temple's gate. I'll bet anything that there's a Master camping out there. The leylines there are perfect for some high-level Magecraft," He smile grew. "So, what do you say?"

Shirou was silent for a moment. Then, he said, "If you keep Rider from attacking any people, I'll tell Saber not to fight her. But I'm not sure if we should team up yet," He already had an alliance with Tohsaka, after all. She might not react kindly if Shirou joined Shinji, and her temper was already being pushed to the breaking point because of Sonic and company. "Let's just call a ceasefire for now."

Shinji gritted his teeth, but forced a smile. "If that's your ans-"

Boom

"-the Hell?" Shinji stood up, confused.

Shirou's nerves went into overdrive. There was something very familiar about that tremor...

A few minutes ago, Saber waited for Shirou in the school council room with Issei. The two had met outside in the hallways, and found themselves on good terms. Issei had never gotten along with girls, but something about Saber's stoicism appealed to the monk-in-training.

"Shirou is late," Saber said, sitting at the table. "What do you think has happened to him."

Issei sighed. "I'm sure it's nothing so serious. It's likely that he's been distracted by someone needing a bit of assistance. He's always been like that."

Saber looked at the student body president. "What do you mean?"

Issei glanced at the door, if expecting Shirou to come in at that moment. When nothing happened, he looked back at Saber and said, "For as long as I've known him, Shirou's never turned down a request from someone. If it was something he could do, he would do it. Whether it was repairing damaged equipment, or cleaning rooms, Shirou did it. I won't deny that he's been a big help to the school..." Issei paused, "Sometimes I worry this attitude might endanger him. Someday some unscrupulous person may take advantage of his better nature."

Saber was silent. She recalled how quickly Shirou jumped between her and Berserker on their first night together. At first she assumed it was just some misplaced chivalry, but now...

Before she could think anymore, she heard some screaming. So did Issei.

"What's that?" He asked, standing up. Opening the door, he saw several students running down the hall. He grabbed one freshman by the arm. "What's all the commotion?"

"O-outside!" The boy yelled, "There's something approaching the school!"

Saber stood up. Without giving Issei another glance, she ran out. Running down the hallway, she saw several students gathered outside a window facing the school courtyard. Annoyingly, they were all taller than her, so she had to force herself to the front in order to see what was the matter. Once she got a good look, her eyes widened. Standing in front of the school was a giant.

Causing a slight tremor with each step, the massive figure approached Homurahara Academy. Though humanoid in basic shape, its body was blocky, looking like it had scales. A faint purple was its paint job, and a face that was blank, save for two yellow eyes and a metal grill that looked like a grimace. Jutting out of its head on both sides were massive, bent antennae, with yellow yellow spheres on each end. /\\\\\\o

E-1056 "Frankly"

In his Egg-Mobile, Dr. Eggman floated in the air, just a little bit before the giant robot. Attached to the bottom was what looked like a boxing glove the size of a wrecking ball. It was both comical and foreboding to look at.

"Let's see, which one was the loudspeaker, again...?" Eggman muttered, and pushed a button. His voice was then amplified for all to hear. " *There we go. Ahem! Attention, students and faculty of this clearly under-budgeted school! I am Dr. Eggman! And I'm afraid you're lessons are going to be cut short!*

" *Somewhere on this campus is a small gem, roughly the size of my fist. Hand it over, and I'll leave without another word. If not ...*"

Eggman turned off his microphone. "Frankly?"

The spheres on Frankly's antenna crackled, and then two bolts of lightning shot out! People screamed as the energy struck the school. Eggman laughed nastily, twirling his mustache. He turned the speaker on again. "*And that was just a warning shot!*"

From her homeroom, Rin stared in horror at the madman threatening their school. As the rest of the room began to panic and rapidly speculate as to what this lunatic was talking about, Rin and Archer held their own private discussion on the matter.

Coming out in broad daylight? She thought, shaking. *Is he INSANE?*

That's why they're called 'mad scientists', Archer told her telepathically, *A severe lack of sanity.*

You know what I mean Archer! Rin retorted, *Why is that idiot coming out in the open?!*

While Rin had become more or less aware, if not accustomed to, the idea that the city was being threatened by dangerous machines, she had subconsciously assumed Eggman would be like the other Masters and act with caution. This flagrant assault had caught her completely by surprise. Not Archer. Unlike Rin, who kept to herself, the Servant had spent the previous day and current morning talking with Tails about life in the fox's own world. Apparently, this sort of thing was a common occurrence where Eggman was concerned.

Rather than saying that, Archer told Rin, *We can discuss his tact is later. This may in fact work in our favor.*

Rin, trying to keep her calm, quickly caught on to what her Servant was saying. *You're right. As annoying as this is, it's easy to fix. Go find a good point and snipe that looney.*

Give me a few minutes, Archer replied, and Rin felt his presence begin to drift away. *I'll be on the roof and ready to act shortly.*

No! Not from the school! Rin mentally shouted, *There's too much attention on the campus to begin with! Do it from another building!*

But that'll leave you in danger, Archer argued, *Unless you've got a healing factor that'll put Shirou's to shame, I don't think you'll survive if one of those lightning bolts hits you.*

"Students," A stern voice said. This was Kuziki Souchirou, another teacher. He was at the door. He seemed his normally stoic self, even in these outlandish circumstances. "Evacuate the school. Now."

I'll be FINE, Rin insisted as she went with others *Just get over there and put an end to this!*

Archer made an unhappy face, but left as directed. While the students hurried out of the room as quickly as they could without trampling each other (Not an easy feat, but doable when Kuzuki-sensei was watching), Souchirou's eyes remained glued on the window. He focused his glare on the floating vehicle in the distance, carrying an rotund madman with a comically bushy mustache. He had been forewarned about such a person, by the latest visitor to the Ryuudou Temple. And he had seen the remains of the giant machine earlier. As such, he wasn't too surprised to see another robot accompanied by the aforementioned maniac. A bit stunned by the doctor's abrupt and decidedly non-subtle actions, true, but not really surprised. Not really.

So, that's Dr. Eggman. The Master of Caster thought.

Shirou, Shinji, and Rider had not seen what caused the explosions. While they had heard Eggman's announcement, and saw pieces of the school explode, they were still unclear as to what was going on. But when they managed to get close enough around the main building to take a look- with Shinji creeping a reasonable distance

behind Shirou- all questions were dispelled, replaced with others, such as...

"WHAT THE HELL IS THAT!?" Shinji screamed, pointing at the giant robot.

Shirou gritted his teeth and reinforced his eyes. Ignoring the hot-rod feeling in his spine, he focused his attention on the figure hovering next to the robot. He then looked at the robot itself, and saw tell-tale trails of smoke coming from its antenna and got a pretty good idea what caused the destruction.

I can't believe he came in person, Was Shirou's first thought. He wasn't too surprised that Eggman had sent another robot- with three Servants at the school, his 'magic detectors' must have been going into overdrive.

"What is a Chaos Emerald?" Rider asked.

"How should I know!?" Shinji clutched his head with one hand, looking both terrified and confused. "Ugh! Tohsaka's family deals in Jewel Magecraft. Maybe this has something to do with her!"

Shirou was surprised to learn that Shinji already knew Rin was a Mage. However, he put his confusion on hold due to the circumstances. Taking Shinji by the shoulders, he faced his estranged friend.

"Listen, Shinji, you need to get Rider out of here." The red-haired Mage said, "Eggman has a machine that lets him detect and track sources of magical energy. That's why he's here! He thinks the presence of our Servants is that Emerald!"

"WHAT?" Shinji cried out. Next to him, Rider's normally impassive face betrayed a look of shock at this revelation. "But, that's impossible!"

Shirou looked back at Eggman. "Honestly, I'm starting to wonder if that word has any meaning anymore- Oh no."

"What now?" Shinji moaned, looking over Shirou's shoulders. While he couldn't reinforce his eyes, he could still see the small army that was now walking around the robot, having hidden in the large machine's shadow, somehow.

" And to help you with your search, I'll be sending my little helpers in!"
" Eggman chortled over his loudspeaker, *" Take care! "*

Shirou's blood went cold as the robots- a small portion of which only looked remotely human- rushed at the school. And that portion were the only ones that bothered to use the doors. The other robots, that looked like oversized crabs, bees, and beetles that had large wheels in place of legs, chose to get in blasting away and crashing through walls and windows.

"Uh, on second thought, leaving might be the best course of action," Shinji decided, and began to back away. "Rider, we're leaving! Watch my back!"

Without giving Shirou another look, Shinji turned and bolted. The purple haired Servant just rolled her eyes, an act hidden from the world, and leapt after him, vanishing as she entered her astral form. Shirou, for his part, was no longer thinking about the Matou teen. Instead, as he rushed for the nearest entrance to the school building, he realized that there was no easy solution. This was going to be a madhouse.

The school was in pandemonium. The invasion of the robots turned what should have been a hurried evacuation into a full-fledged riot. The Badniks(Copyright of Robotnik Industries, Patent Pending) seemed to be everywhere, knocking over furniture and blasting anything that moved in their search. Students and teachers alike tripped over each other trying to get away. For Saber, this made her search for Shirou incredibly difficult.

"Shi-!" Her cry for help was cut off as a hefty third-year student shoved her aside. Growling, she got up, only for the tide of bodies to suddenly go in the other direction. She quickly realized why; A robot built like a crab (Sonic had called this model Crabmeat) had appeared behind a corner! The Badnik pointed one claw at Saber, and from a gun port in the direct center, a fireball flew out. Saber ducked- The fire struck a wall, blasting it a hole in it- and shot towards the robot. She gave Crabmeat a solid kick, sending it out a window. Thankfully, no one had been around to see it. But that was only a small comfort. Even without the highly-tuned senses of a Heroic Spirit, she could hear and feel the havoc the rest of the Badniks were wreaking. The building shook again, and Saber looked out the window in alarm. Apparently, Eggman had the giant robot launch another salvo at the school. The lady knight watched as the mad doctor's evil laugh reached her ears. Deep down, she wanted nothing more than to go out and personally take Eggman down- the fastest way to end a battle was to eliminate the enemy's head, after all. But to go out in public and fight would expose the War. Not that every act of these off-worlders weren't doing that already...Eggman's assault was already attracting attention. Even from this distance, she could see a news crew getting everything on film. It wouldn't be long until the entire city, perhaps all of Japan, would see what was going on. And they would know that something called a "Chaos Emerald" was worth leveling an entire school for.

That's right...Eggman thinks the energy from Servants are those Emeralds, Saber thought, That's why he came here. Maybe I can use that...

As she pondered on a plan, Saber's eyes drifted towards a door. It had a sign.

Drama Club

"Hyyaaah!" Shirou yelled swinging a piece of metal that used to be a chair leg. It struck a Motobug dead on, knocking it off its wheel. With its balance disrupted, Shirou allowed himself to relax, and the feeling

like a hot metal rod up his spine left. He had been reinforcing not only the metal, but also his upper body to increase the force of his swing. He let out a heavy sigh. The way Sonic described it, trashing Badniks sounded easy. But he barely put a dent in the thing. Luckily, because of its design, the Motobug would be incapacitated for several minutes- which was more than enough time to put some distance in. He glanced at the pair of staff members who had been huddle against a corner for safety.

"What are you doing? Run!" Shriou shouted, and the two adults fled. He heard a metal whining, and turned back to see that an Egg Pawn was helping up the Motobug. Once it was back on its wheel, the robotic beetle pointed a claw at Shirou. The Egg Pawn glanced at Shirou, before waving hurriedly at a nearby door. Another Egg Pawn came out.

Shirou gulped. Somehow, he didn't like the way they were looking at him.

Rin wasn't faring much better. She, along with a group of girls that included Ayako, were at the time running for their lives from a trio of Crabmeats whose awkward design was the only thing keeping them at bay. While Rin wanted to use her own Magecraft and destroy the things, she knew she couldn't. For one thing, someone might see her; Even if she could alter their memories, it was too great a chance to take. Furthermore, the magic she stored in her gems was meant to fight in the Holy War. She couldn't waste them on... *machines* . As long as she could keep her distance, it would be fine. They would wreck the school, but that wasn't her business.

But it is your business, a little voice whispered in the back of her mind. It was the same voice that told her to use her special pendant to heal Shirou. You know why Eggman thinks there is a Chaos Emerald here. If you had left school earlier, find an excuse to take Shirou with you, Eggman's detectors would not have brought him here. He would not think there is power here.

And now that he has come, you are running away. Ignoring those you could help.

It was a voice that used to speak quite loudly when she was younger, but went silent in recent years. And it was because of that voice that she healed Shirou, using the pendant she stored ten years of magic in. And with every word that voice spoke, Rin's pace slowed just a little bit, until she was at the back of the pack. Everyone else was too busy fleeing for their own lives to notice. When they passed around a corner, Rin stopped running. And amazingly, so did the robots. They weren't smart machines, (though Rin was of the opinion that machines didn't think period) truth be told. As good as he was at designing hardware, artificial intelligence was a facet of the trade that Eggman lacked. The Crabmeats knew that Rin had some strange energy inside of her, power similar to that of the Chaos Emeralds, but could not comprehend or conceive of why that was. As they regarded her, Rin made her move. Reinforcing her body, calling upon private lessons in martial arts, Rin swept her leg in a devastating kick that not only caught one Crabmeat, but caused it to collide with the other two. They crashed into a wall, suffering much damage. Rin was a better Mage than Shirou, who could better control her Prana. As such, she had done a better job of attacking her pursuers than he had. That said, using her bare leg and not a weapon was probably a bad idea.

Shaking off the pain, Rin resumed her run. As she went, she hoped that things would improve soon- though how they could get any worse required more thought than she could spare at the moment.

Eggman's trip to Homurahara Academy did not go unnoticed. From the moment he and his forces entered Japan, police switchboards all around the country had been swamped with calls about the evil robot armies. As such, it did not take long for both the police *and* a small military force to arrive at the school. A news crew also came, and was covering the story from a safe distance.

As two tanks rolled up, a police captain began to speak through a megaphone, "*Attention! You are causing a disturbance!*"

Eggman glanced at the assembled forces and raised an eyebrow. *Only two tanks? How insulting.*

"*You are ordered to stand down, or we will use force!*" The captain finished, and his words would have been somewhat intimidating if it wasn't for the slight tremble at the very end.

Eggman had turned his Eggmobile around to fully address the captain. He bunched up his fists and held them to his face in mock fright. "Oh, no! Not *force!* How could I have forgotten about *force!* What *ever* shall I *do?*" He wailed, the sarcasm so thick it was a wonder they could leave his mouth. Dropping both his hands and the sarcasm, he growled, "Here's an idea!"

The giant boxing glove jittered, then rocketed off, connected to the Eggmobile's underside by a chain. It crashed into captain's police car, sending it flipping over. As the glove retracted, the tanks began to turn their cannons towards Eggman and Frankly. Rather than waiting for them to finish aiming, the giant robot fired two more bolts of lightning from its antenna, wrecking them instantly.

"Ahh! Nothing like a little pointless destruction to take the edge off!" Eggman chuckled, rubbing his hands together eagerly. "But, I'll have plenty of time for that when I rule the world. Frankly!" The Eggmobile spun around to face the school. "The Badniks are taking too long! Smash that building to pieces and we'll search through the rubble!"

Frankly nodded, and began to march towards the school. Each step made a loud noise, and those who hadn't run away or were still conscious began to liken them to a death knell. As it moved, the spheres its antenna began to glow as they built up energy.

CRUNCH

CRUNCH

CRUNCH

Those in the school that were near the front windows saw Frankly coming, and caused a greater panic when they spread word that the *bigger* robot was coming on top of the small army that were already in the building. Some had just lied down and decided to accept the end peacefully. This was a world without heroes, and one where its people died very easily.

"Stop right there!"

And lo, did a hero appear.

Eggman cocked his head. That wasn't the voice he had been expecting. And when he looked down, he saw that standing in front of Frankly wasn't the hero he had been expecting.

It was Saber. She had materialized her armor, but not her invisible sword. Her head was obscured entirely by a helmet. It was not the headgear worn by the knights of old, but a replica of the kind the Kamen Rider had. And in spite of the conflicting styles creating an appearance that was patently ridiculous, her presence did stop Frankly in its tracks...from confusion.

"You will not find what you seek here!" Saber declared. This was not the best plan, she knew. she was taking a huge risk, coming out into the open. "Leave this place, at once!"

Eggman raised an eyebrow. "And who are you supposed to be, the Mighty Bug Queen?" He was about to complain about the quality of superheroes in the dimension when his computer beeped. When he saw the readouts, his eyes widened underneath the glasses; this strange girl was brimming with energy, like she was made of the stuff! "Oho! So, *you've* got the Chaos Emerald!"

Saber smiled bitterly. So, the loon was taking the bait. So far, so good. Now was the tricky part. When Frankly lunged at her, Saber had to be very careful on how she dodged. There were people

watching, after all. If she moved too quickly, displayed ability far beyond what a mortal being could do, it would break the facade of normality the Mages Association worked to create- and would kill to maintain. Waiting until the absolutely last minute, she jumped aside, just narrowly avoiding Frankly's mechanized fists. She even threw herself into a roll, to better create the illusion that she was inches away from dying. She couldn't let it look too easy.

"Catch me if you can!" She shouted, moving away. Hopefully, Eggman, and his robots, would be lured away from the school in the doctor's mad hunger for power.

"Not so fast!" Eggman shouted, pointing dramatically. "Unless you hand over that Chaos Emerald over to me, my Badniks will destroy the school! So don't think about leaving yet- unless you don't care what happens to those poor, innocent students!"

Saber felt herself freeze. Suddenly, she found that she was between a rock and a hard place; In her zeal to try and solve the situation quickly, she may have made things worse. She couldn't fight effectively in public. But if she tried to move the battle to a less open location, Eggman's robots would go on a rampage!

Archer, stationed on a nearby building, raised an eyebrow at what happened in the school's courtyard. He had long since been dulled to surprises, but seeing Saber in that Kamen Rider helmet came very close to breaking his calm. He actually lowered his bow for a brief second before bringing it back up.

Damn, she actually looks kinda cute in that, he thought, I wonder if I can get her to wear the helmet again later on.

"*I am the bone of my sword .*" He intoned, and a sword appeared in his hand. It was Hrunting, a weapon that would always seek its target. A bit overkill, but for all he knew Eggman had his hover car surrounded by an invisible forcefield. Recent events had taught him to expect anything.

Archer! Why haven't you shot Eggman yet!? Rin's voice echoed in his head.

I assume you've seen what Saber's gotten into?

Yes! What is she think- Owww!

What happened?

I hit my wrist. Things are going crazy now- the robots are out of control! Emiya must have infected Saber with his stupidity!

It'll over in a minute, hopefully, Archer said mentally as he pulled his bow back. *Try not to watch. This could get messy.*

"Hey, that's no fun. They've just gotten started."

Archer felt an incredibly **dark** presence behind him and whirled about, inadvertently releasing the bowstring. A portion of the building's roof exploded, and when the dust settled, Archer's eyes beheld something very much *un* settling. It was some kind of...living shadow, black, and glowing with a purple aura. It's red, dot eyes were staring holes into the bowman...hopefully, not literally.

"So, you're this war's Archer, huh?" It asked in a voice that resonated from its entire body. "Gotta say, I'm not impressed. You're nowhere near as cool as the last guy."

"And just what are you supposed to be?" Archer hissed, Projecting his swords. He had no idea what was standing before him. It looked too monstrous to be a Servant, even by the standard set by Berserker. On the other hand, it's Mana was higher than any familiar he had encountered in life. Regardless, every fiber of Archer's being, every sense, every instinct was screaming at him to destroy the abomination before him.

"Oh, just another Servant," Avenger said, "I was looking for someone to play with. But Master asked me not to harm any people, which led

me to you. After all...Servants aren't *people* ..."

Avenger reached out, and its arm suddenly stretched out and lunged at Archer, with movements almost like snake at its prey. Archer parried the assault, and turned his white blade into a Broken Phantasm, a sword overloaded with Prana to the point of bursting. Any Servant could do so, but that would mean losing their weapon for the rest of the War. Archer, however, could replicate any number of his arsenal a number of times. But as ghastly thing before him regrew his arm, the bowman knew it was only a slight advantage.

Rin, it's going to take me a bit longer to get Eggman...

Shirou had no idea what was happening outside. He spent most of his time running all over the school, avoiding robots whenever the odds were too great, and helping those who hadn't been able to escape. And now, for reasons that were unknown to him, the Badniks weren't just knocking things over in their search for an Emerald. They were purposely breaking down walls, smashing through chalkboards, and tipping over chairs. At one point, he almost saw an Egg Pawn drawing obnoxious doodles on one blackboard punching a hole in it with its metal fist.

And amongst that madness was Emiya Shirou, Master of Saber. Even though the robots were not actively pursuing him, he still had to be careful. Their weird designs notwithstanding, these were dangerous machines. There was no way he could destroy all of them. With that in mind, Shirou only fought the ones that were attacking people. The robots did chase him, but apparently lost interest the minute he left their sight.

A shriek caught Shirou's attention, and it was a very familiar one.
Sakura!

Racing into one room, Shirou found to his horror that his underclassman was trapped with two robots. In the center of the classroom, a Crabmeat and a Motobug were standing over a pile of

wood that used to be someone's desk. The Crabmeat was fiddling with the matches, apparently unable to strike one properly. Sakura was huddled in one corner, rocking back and forth in fear. Walking carefully around the Badniks (Who were now fighting over the matches- Motobug was losing), Shirou crept up to his underclassman. He saw that, despite the tears running down her face, the girl was catatonic, almost in a world of his own.

"Sakura...?" He whispered, keeping one eye on the robots.

"I'm going to die..." She moaned, almost unaware.

"Sakura, it's going to be all right," Shirou said.

"I can't do this anymore..." She sobbed, "I can't keep pretending..."

There were everywhere. The flames. the screams. People crying out for help, begging to be saved. A small boy stood out from the crowd, the only one not crushed under burning rubble. He walked alone, heedless to their wails...

Shirou forced that scene out. Taking Sakura's hand, he tried to stand her up.

"I'm going to get you out of here," He told her, "It's going to be okay."

There came a sound of wood burning, and gears shifting. Looking, Shirou saw both robots looking at them. And the desk was on fire. Without another word, he grabbed Sakura by the arm and dragged her out as quickly as possible.

Fujimura Taiga was in her element, so to speak. When Eggman first appeared, her first reaction was to gawk at the spectacle. Immediately afterwards, she began to act. While most of the city and basically the entire school thought of her as an overgrown child, a hyperactive girl in a woman's skin, she had earned her teacher's credentials for a reason, and spearheaded the evacuation effort.

Which to her, was personally leading a large crowd of students out of the school while using her formidable *kendo* skills to remove any robots in their way. The Badniks weren't destroyed, but they became a lot less eager to go near the clearly unstable woman with a wooden stick.

But as caught in the action as Taiga was, she hadn't forgotten that two of her favorite students were MIA. She wanted to keep looking around the school for them, but Taiga knew she had to make sure the students she had already found were out of danger.

Shirou, Sakura, please be safe! She silently pleaded.

Archer didn't know what he was going to do. Which showed just how bad the situation was. He prided himself on his control and discipline, the mental ability to discern which strategy was the best one to implement. Even against an opponent that far exceeded his abilities, the bowman knew how to act (IE, run away). But against the creature before him, he was at a loss. It wasn't that the 'Servant' was a particularly skilled fighter. Far from it. As creepy as its extending body parts were, the shadowy being lacked the strength to actually close the gap between him and Archer. Thanks to his ability to Project and explode a holy sword as many times as he wanted, Archer could easily fend off the creature's assaults. But the inverse was true as well. No matter how many times the shadow got blasted, its body would just regenerate as if nothing happened. It was like fighting the tide at a beach.

And what was it? It claimed to be a Servant, but Archer knew that was impossible. All of the Servant roles had already been filled. Lancer, Saber, and Berserker he had seen personally, and Saber confirmed that the Rider he knew had appeared. And judging from the crowds of people that had fainted, the Caster from his War had appeared as well. That meant the Assassin was the same, too. Hopefully. Then again...

"So, if you're a Servant, which one are you?" Archer asked his attacker, "Assassin, I suppose?"

Avenger hummed. "Oh, I've got a bit of Assassin in me...lots of Assassin, actually. And Rider. And Berserker. In fact..." Avenger's spherical head cocked, and its red crescent smile grew wider. "The only pieces I'm missing are Archer and Saber..."

And now Archer was worried for additional reasons.

Shirou was worried. The Badniks chasing after him and Sakura had increased in number. And he knew why. The machines were confusing the Prana inside of him for the energy of the Chaos Emerald. Therefore, the obvious solution was to separate from Sakura and lure the Badniks away from her. But that plan was out. In her current state, Sakura was unlikely to make it out from the school before the robots destroyed it.

A Motobug appeared around a corner. Without even thinking about it, Shirou Reinforced his leg and kicked it, sending the machine off its stride. He pulled Sakura around it, not even bothering to give the Motobug a second glance. Shirou knew it would get back up. If only he could use magic to destroy the robots more completely...

Saber kept jumping around, dodging Frankly's attempts to grab her. It was embarrassing, to spend the battle dodging, but there was little else she could do. With the whole of the city watching, (Thank you, Journalism and information streaming technology!) she couldn't unleash her full fighting potential without exposing Magecraft. Even without using her sword, moving too quickly would tell too much. And if she tried to run away, Eggman would take out his frustration on the rest of the school and its occupants. While Saber hoped that she bought enough time for the students and faculty to run away, she couldn't take the chance. What she *really* wanted to do was punch the doctor in the face. But Eggman kept his Egg Mobile floated just out of range- for a human. If it wasn't for the public eye, nothing short

of dramatic emphasis would keep her from leaping up and breaking Eggman's jaw.

But Eggman wasn't content to just watch. With his thumb on the trigger, every ounce of Eggman's concentration was set on waiting until the ideal moment to strike. He had done this many times in his skirmishes with Sonic; Keep the enemy hopping with little attacks, then, when they slowed down for just a *second* , WHAMMO!

Engman was so busy waiting to hit Saber that he didn't notice the blue ball rocketing towards him. No one did, until it rammed into the Egg Mobile. The hover vehicle rocked, and Engman's fingers accidentally, brushed the trigger. The boxing glove blasted off, missing Saber by a full meter and struck Frankly in the chest. Saber looked to see what had happened- and who had saved her.

"Sonic!" She cried, for it was he. Standing on top of a ruined tank, rubbing his nose for all the world to see. He did not seem the least bit perturbed to be caught out in the open. If anything, the Hedgehog seemed to revel in the attention.

"Nice mask, sister," Sonic greeted, snapping his finger. He pointed at Eggman. "Yo, Eggman! Just because you never graduated from high school, doesn't mean you have to ruin it for everyone else!"

Recovering, Eggman's mustache bristled as he glared at his hated nemesis. "You! You *are* here!"

"Live, and in color, Egg-baby!" Sonic declared, spreading out his arms

"I should have know," Eggman growled, "Well, you're not stopping me this time! Frankly! Forget the Bug Queen! *Get that Hedgehog!* "

Frankly fired another salvo of lighting at Sonic, which he effortlessly dodged. Evidently, he had fewer problems with using his abilities in public. Once he landed, Saber appeared by his side.

"Why are you here?" She asked in a low voice.

"Tails saw a news stream and gave me a buzz," Sonic replied, "Thought you needed a hand."

Their brief discussion was interrupted by Eggman trying to pound them with his boxing glove again. Jumping in opposite directions, they regrouped in front of the school fountain.

"Tails is inside, cleaning out the other robots!" Sonic explained, "But if you wanna go back and check on your man, I won't blame you."

Saber thought about it. Sonic's offer was a bit generous. She wanted nothing more than to retreat and ensure the welfare of her Master. There was no telling what kind of danger he had gotten into while she had been preoccupied. And she knew that coming out at all had been pushing it. But she couldn't abandon the battle now. Not only would that mean leaving Sonic to fight two enemies on his own, but *someone* had to keep him from acting too outrageously. Just because they were breaking the rules of secrecy, it did not mean they should go out of their way to expose everyone else.

"No, I will stay," Saber said, "After all, Shirou would never forgive me if I let someone face danger without offering my aid. Besides," She looked up at Eggman's frowning face as he and Frankly charged at them. "I have a pressing need to teach that lunatic a lesson!"

"Aww, but I wanted to take down Eggman," Sonic mock-whined.

"My world, my dibs." Saber replied.

"Fair enough."

A glass dome closed over Eggman in his cockpit, and the doctor shook his fist at the heroes. "You're history!"

Inside the school, the small group of escapees had passed by a window when Sonic appeared. And his appearance did not go unnoticed. While all of the students had wide-eyes of shock, the biggest pair belonged to Rin and Ayako.

"SEE?! IT'S HIM!" Ayako yelled, pointing. "I TOLD YOU!"

Rin couldn't say anything. Her tongue had frozen and her mouth was stuck open. *What is that idiot doing?!*

Before Rin could fully process what was happening, one of the boys yelled. A pair of Buzz Bombers had appeared around a corner. The robot bees aimed their stinger-cannons at the students, and the barrels glowed. As the other students backed away in fright, only Rin remained still. She knew that there were robots behind them. They were stuck between a rock and a hard place. As much as Rin didn't like doing it, she would have to use her Gems to shoot down the Buzz Bombers. Luckily, all of the eventual witnesses were gathered in the same place, so erasing their memories would be a simple chore.

Before Rin could enact her daring plan, fate intervened in the form of a fluffy, orange ball. The ball struck each Buzz Bomber, destroying them completely. As bits of metal rained down on the floor, a pair of birds- with large heads and large eyes- appeared from the wreckage and flew off, looking only slightly disoriented. Then, the orange ball uncurled to reveal itself to be none other than Tails.

"Are you guys all right?" The fox asked, "Nobody hurt?"

The students stared at him. The boy who had cried out simply pointed. " *Ki-kitsune...* "

"Another one..." Ayako murmured, equally stunned. "What *are* guys?"

"Umm..." Tails scratched the back of his head. When he saw the Badniks threatening the students, he forgot about Rin's none-too-

gentle request to stay hidden as old instincts kicked in. Speaking of Rin, her surprise had given way to a look of fury, complete with throbbing veins on her forehead. While Tails believed his actions were justified by dint of defending the weak and helpless, he decided that he might try to meet her halfway on the subject.

"Not magic, that's for sure!" Was his answer to Ayako's question. Judging from the way Rin clutched her forehead, that answer wasn't as snappy as he would have liked. He decided to change the subject. "Uh, oh no! More Badniks!" He began to helicopter. "I'll take care of them, take the exit on the other side of the building, away from where Sonic and Eggman are fighting."

As the students ran past Tails, Rin slowed down just enough to make a very threatening gesture. It consisted of carefully making a tracing a line at neck-level with her finger. Tails got her message. Gulping, he flew forward at the approaching Badniks. Maybe if he crushed enough robots the adrenalin would override the fear.

Back outside, the battle was starting to turn in Saber's favor. With Frankly's attention being commanded by Sonic, she was able to better focus on Eggman. It was surprisingly easy. For as shockingly powerful as his metallic boxing glove was when it actually hit something, (As an unfortunate army tank found out when it got caught in the crossfire) it was simple for someone with the heightened reflexes of a Heroic Spirit to dodge. And then, the time in which Eggman needed to retract the glove for another shot gave Saber time to run up the cybernetic tether to attack his pod directly. Every time she got up onto his Egg Mobile, she would rain her fists down in an attempt to break through the protective dome over the doctor. Eggman would shake her off each time, but not by his own skill- Her Riding skill was high enough to maintain her balance even on the most wobbling vehicle, but she had to keep in mind that people were still watching. More so, now that a large crowd seemed to be forming. The police and military had long since given up trying to take part in the battle, and were now on crowd control. The news

crew had dared to come in closer to better cover the incident, with the reporter trying to remain relevant by narrating what was happening.

And Sonic loved every minute of it. Unlike Saber, he didn't bother to hold back what he could do. He zipped around Frankly with reckless abandon, occasionally holding still long enough for the robot to take aim, then miss by dodging at just the right moment. Even the sub-boss' lightning failed to strike its target; Sonic could tell just when the balls on its antenna would fire off sparks. Sometimes Frankly wouldn't bother with the lighting, and try to either stomp on or punch Sonic directly. Naturally, he missed, and whenever Frankly bent down to punch Sonic, the Hedgehog would Homing Shot his head.

At one point, Frankly picked up one of the destroyed tanks and threw it at Sonic. He missed, but the military weapon crashed into the school building, destroying a lamp post in the process.

"Whoa!" Sonic cried, turning to look at the damage for moment. He activated his watch. "Tails! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Tails reported. He had been at another building when the tank collided. "But what was that noise?"

" *Eggman's robot just heaved a tank at the main part of the school,* " Sonic explained, " *Anyone hurt?* "

"I don't think so," Tails replied, "I found a few people trapped in wrecked classrooms, but I don't think anyone's in the front. Rin's taking some students out, but I haven't found Shirou, yet."

" *That dude can take care of himself. He's got this weird healing magic that lets him regrow his body, or something. Just focus on helping the ones that aren't wizards.* "

"Got it." Tails hung up and saw another Motobug coming around the corner. It was destroyed in seconds, allowing a cute bunny to hop

free of its metal prison. And as soon as the dust settled, another Egg Pawn appeared as well. That too was destroyed, freeing a little piggie. Tails began to notice that most of the Badniks he encountered were all going in the same direction, more or less. Curious, he began to wonder what exactly they were going towards.

The sound of a young girl shrieking broke into his thoughts. Tails quickly began to fly towards the source.

Shirou and Sakura were trapped. A wrong turn down a hall had led them to an unused room. And before they could backtrack, a group of Badniks had appeared; two Egg Pawns, a Crabmeat, and a Motobug. The robots marched towards the two teens, goofy but menacing.

Shirou gently pushed Sakura behind him. His mind whirled as he considered and dismissed options. He didn't have any magic strong enough to destroy the robots, he knew that. Reinforcing his body or any tools he had wouldn't be sufficient, and while he had better luck Projecting weapons, he doubted a bow and arrow would have any effect on the Badniks; they were too close to aim properly. And while he would have liked to materialize swords (For some reason, the two wielded by Archer came to mind), he didn't think they would have much effect on robots. Shirou found himself thinking, *What would Sonic do?* and his mind went back to that first night, when he, Sonic, and Saber were talking. That night, in trying to impress the Hedgehog, he almost killed himself demonstrating his Magecraft. All of those swords bursting out of his body had made a poor first impression...

As the Badniks loomed, Shirou remembered what he said to Rin when the first robot attacked; If a machine's inner workings are disrupted, that device would malfunction.

An idea came to mind. It was risky, but he had to give Sakura a chance to escape.

"Sakura," Shirou said, bracing himself. "When I say so, run, all right?"

"What?" Sakura whispered, confused.

Without another word, Shirou threw himself at one of the Egg Pawns. He didn't bother Reinforcing his body, he would need all of his Prana and concentration to pull this off. The Egg Pawn flailed its arms awkwardly, having been caught off guard by this straightforward tactic. In that moment, Shirou put his plan into action. With his hand over the robot's chest, he created an image of a sword in his mind. He ignored the heat, the pain. With his will, he began to give it physical mass. It didn't matter what kind of sword it was. The history, the strength...none of that was required. What was needed at that moment was its placement. Shirou had to bring this sword into the world...inside the Egg Pawn!

The Egg Pawn began to shake as its structure was disrupted. Mass that was never there appeared, pushing gears and circuits out of alignment.

There was not supposed to be anything like that inside. That was the reality.

But the fundamental aspect of Magecraft was defying that reality. The stronger a Mage, the longer the world's order could be ignored. Shirou was not a particularly strong Mage, but he refused to accept that fact. Shirou wanted it to happen. He hoped it would be. He clung to the desired outcome. He would not let go!

BOOM! (Out came a birdie)

Inside the Badnik, reality and fantasy fought for dominance. The sword formed, breaking the machinery, just as Shirou assumed. He didn't expect the explosion, though. Burnt and cut by shrapnel, Shirou fell back. Sakura gasped. That was more than she believed her upperclassman was capable of. The remaining Badniks paused, trying to figure out what had happened.

Shirou gasped, trying to ignore the pain. He wondered how Sonic and Tails managed to avoid getting hurt from doing it. But now there was a gap in the enemy's lineup.

"Sakura, run!" He yelled, and jumped at the next Egg Pawn- and that's where everything went wrong.

While Dr. Eggman's robots were not bright, they didn't have short memories. The Egg Pawn didn't know how Shirou destroyed its fellow unit, but it wasn't going to give him a chance to do it again. It grabbed Shirou with one hand and held him away. It had a pretty strong grip for such a goofy design.

" *Shirou!* " Sakura shrieked. She was terrified. She was backed into a corner, literally. As the other two robots approached, a strange feeling began to build within her. It was almost like a hot vacuum being formed...

With Sakura fearing for their lives, Shirou wincing in pain, and the Badniks focused on their targets, no one saw Tails come around a corner. When the fox saw what was happening. Getting on the floor, he prepared a Spin Dash and shot forward, destroying first the Egg Pawn. Shirou fell to the floor, and in that time Tails spun out and smashed the Crabmeat and Motobug. From the debris came bunny, and two more piggies. As they scampered away, Tails went over and helped Shirou up.

"Are you okay?" Tails asked.

"I'm fine..." Shirou began, and they both heard a clunk. Turning, they saw that Sakura was now lying on the floor. Shirou inhaled quickly, and Tails hovered over the girl's body.

"She's still alive," The fox reported, "I think she just fainted."

Shirou bent down and carefully held Sakura up in his arms. It was probably a good thing she passed out. Doing Magecraft in front of her had been risky, and Tails appearing would undoubtedly yield too

many questions- questions that Shirou wasn't ready to answer. With luck, Sakura would probably write everything off as a dream, with the exception of the robots. No one would forget *them* anytime soon.

"We need to get out of here." The Master of Saber said, and saw Tails hovering up to his level. "Is Sonic here, too?"

Tails nodded. "Yup. Him and Saber are fighting Eggman right outside."

"What?!"

Eggman fired his giant boxing glove, and Saber jumped over it. Furious, Eggman hit the retract button, pulling the glove back towards the Egg Mobile before it could hit anything. He fired a second time, but Saber not dodged it, but did so without breaking her offensive against the Egg Mobile. Leaping up onto the craft, she slammed her fists against the dome a few times before being shaken off.

"Grr... Hold still!" He shouted, and aimed again.

Sonic meanwhile, continued his own fight against Frankly. After a few close calls dodging the robot's lighting blasts, the Hedgehog decided that a new tactic was in order. When Frankly threw a punch, Sonic ran up the robot's fist. Once on Frankly's shoulders, Sonic began to bounce between the antenna-spheres at high-speed. Within minutes the spheres exploded, causing Frankly to stumble.

Saber saw this out of the corner of her eye. A plan formed in her mind. While she felt she was getting closer to breaking through Eggman's defenses, she also knew that of the two Frankly was more dangerous. With that in mind, she knew what had to be done. Saber moved, and positioned herself so that she was between the Egg Mobile and the sub-boss. But that was not enough. Eggman's craft was above her, so his boxing glove was angled downward. Saber knew she had to fix that.

" Mana Burst! "

Saber's abilities went up in a flash, like a jet taking off. And her movements became like a jet as well, shooting towards the Egg Mobile. She rammed Eggman's craft, causing it fall back in the air. The boxing glove shot at the same time, but due to the change in the Egg Mobile's position was no longer aimed at the pavement.

BOOM! Headshot.

Frankly's head, now sporting a very large dent in its face, landed several feet behind the body. Said body began to shake, before exploding spectacularly. Sonic, having narrowly dodged the glove by leaping in the air, came down and Homing Shot the Egg Mobile. Eggman's craft had already been damaged somewhat by Saber's own assault (While she couldn't use her sword in public, Mana Bursting her arms had helped), and Sonic's attack was enough to finish the job. The parts of the Egg Mobile began to explode, causing the extra components to fall off.

Landing on the ground, Sonic gave Eggman a cheeky grin. "I believe this is the part where you say, 'Curses! Foiled again!' Or how about, 'I hate you Hedgehog'? I miss that."

Eggman shook his fist at the Blue Blur. "Don't get ahead of yourself, Sonic. This is only the beginning! I *will* get the other Emeralds, mark my words!"

The Egg Mobile turned around and flew off. Without the boxing glove to weigh it down, it was able to fly higher and more quickly. Police and military personal tried to shoot at him with their personal arms, but missed. As this happened, Sonic turned on wrist-comm.

"Tails, we just sent Eggman packing. How're things on your end?" He asked.

" Great, Sonic! I think the school's been cleared out, and I found Shirou. We'll meet you guys at Rin's place! Tails out! "

Sonic hung up and looked up at Saber. She had been looking out in the direction the Egg Mobile went. Judging from the way her fists were clenched, there was a nasty glare underneath that helmet.

"You okay?" He asked.

"...I hate fighting in such a roundabout manner." She said finally, "I would have preferred to use my sword."

"Then why didn't you?" He asked, and realized the answer. "Right, no one's supposed to know you're a magic ghost. We're gonna meet the others at Rin's house."

Sonic raced off. And after a moment, Saber fled as well. And although she kept her pace far beneath the level of velocity Sonic went at, it was still fast enough to put her out of sight from the approaching reporters and cops.

Although he had to keep his eyes on Avenger, Archer's senses were so honed that he was almost aware of everything around him. After hearing the explosions and the sound of jets roaring, he realized that the battle at the school had ended in Saber and Sonic's favor. All that was left was to finish his own duel with Avenger...

But the weird Servant no longer seemed interested in fighting. He continued to stare at the Counter Guardian, but no longer had an offensive stance. Instead, his head was cocked, as if contemplating something.

"...I get it." Avenger said.

"Get what?"

"Why my Master is so scare of me."

Archer was a bit confused by this odd topic, but didn't let his guard down. It might have been a ploy. "What do you mean?"

"Aside from when I was first summoned, my Master has never looked me in the eye," Avenger continued, "But you're Master does, doesn't she, 5th Archer?"

Archer didn't reply. Yes, Rin never failed to make eye-contact, but it was mostly to glare at him in a half-hearted attempt to appear superior. What was Avenger going on about? He was tempted to prepare an attack, but knew it would have been a waste of energy. Lackluster fighting style aside, Avenger was durable. None of Archer's more subtle attacks, did any lasting harm. He wanted to bring out a more powerful sword, but that would attract too much attention, especially now that Eggman and his robot were beaten.

"The reason Master doesn't want to look at me..." Avenger went on, "...Is because I'm not as handsome as you, or Saber's Master."

"...What?"

Avenger's body began to vibrate. The creature's skin was like the surface of a pond after a rock had been dropped into it. It rippled. Parts of his body began to shrink, while others grew. His head became less like a blob and more human.

Archer's eyes widened at the result. Standing right in front of him was a doppelganger of Shirou. His skin was an immensely dark color, and tribal tattoos were all over him. The red hair was now a coal black. It was as if Shirou had inexplicably gained a twin brother. An evil twin...

"Ahh!" Avenger sighed, flexing his new muscular arm. "This feels nice! No wonder guys like you are so cocky. With these muscles, I bet I could take on the world and win!" He looked away and chuckled. "Looks like things at the school are finally cooling down. Why don't we pick this up some other time?"

Avenger's body began to sink into its own shadow. Archer realized what was happening and sent his white sword into Overload. Another piece of the rooftop was destroyed, but to no avail. Archer

could see a silhouette slinking away in the distance, moving almost tauntingly. Archer gritted his teeth. As if the mad scientist and his killer robots wasn't bad enough, but now *this* thing had appeared. The Holy War had barely started and it was already going to Hell in a handbasket.

Archer looked down at the school from his perch. Just as he thought, Eggman's robot was junk, and both the doctor, along with Saber and Sonic, were gone. While police kept the crowds from moving in, military personnel did just did, acting as if their tanks weren't just destroyed. Archer realized that he'd better vanish too. No doubt some bright spark would notice the rooftop battle now that the distracting robots were gone. He went astral, hoping Rin was all right...

High in the sky, the Egg Mobile limped along. The damaged parts left small trails of smoke in its wake. In the cockpit, Eggman gritted his teeth in fury. How he *hated* that Hedgehog. No matter what it was, where it happened, the minute Sonic entered the game everything would go south.

" *Sir, you'll be happy to learn that you've made the top news story.* " Orbot reported over the communicator. The screen showed footage of Frankly attacking the school, followed by a less-than-becoming shot of Eggman laughing like a loon. This image was accompanied by the headline, 'Madman attacks school!'.

"I got my butt kicked on television!" Eggman snarled, "How would *that* make me happy?"

" *Err...* " Orbot looked away for a moment before changing the subject. " *Shifting gears, our radar has begun picking up numerous energy signals all over the city and surrounding landscape. I'm feeding the information into your personal computer.* "

A map appeared, and on it several dots appeared. In fact, a few were moving around.

"Wait a minute..." Eggman muttered, "That's too many! There should only be seven signals to track!"

" *Quite the conundrum, sir.* "

"Hmm..." Eggman rubbed his chin in thought. He recalled the empowered helmeted girl who helped Sonic at the school. Could there be other people empowered by the Emeralds? "Send a few Egg Pods to the city. I'm having my remaining Badniks resume critter-capture and scouting missions. Also, set up another pad. We'll figure this out one way or another, and get the Chaos Emeralds.

"And this time- Yes, I know I've said it before- *This* time, Sonic, or any weird sidekick he meets, is not going to stop me!"

Tohsaka Mansion. It was dusk by the time Shirou, Rin, and their Servants got away from Homurahara Academy. They would have left sooner, but the military insisted on "interviewing" everyone who hadn't already fled the madness.

Rin had thrown herself into the arm chair that had once been used by her father, although Tokiomi usually looked far more composed whenever he sat in it. On the adjacent couch were team Saber. The red-haired Mage looked worriedly at his fellow Master, while the lady knight sitting at his side showed no emotions. Standing by was Archer, arms folded in a manner that was both relaxed and pure badass. Ordinarily, he would have remained in his astral mode, but felt that his physical presence was needed for two important reasons.

- 1) If he was astral, only Rin would hear his informative snarking.
- 2) being solid might keep their guests out of trouble.

Seated lazily on the floor was Sonic the Hedgehog, munching from a bag of chips. A blue pillow was all that came between spiny butt and expensive carpeting. In the air hovered Tails, kept aloft by his twin

namesake appendages. Occasionally, Sonic would toss his little buddy a chip, which Tails caught in his mouth.

"That was the worse day ever." Rin moaned.

"Aw, it wasn't that bad." Sonic remarked casually.

Rin shot Sonic a dark look. "Oh? And how do *you* believe that?"

"Well," Sonic put his hands behind his head. "We trashed one of Eggman's robots, saved your school, and no one died," He popped a chip into his mouth. "Pretty good day, all told."

"Really."

Archer instantly realized Rin's subdued behavior was nothing more than the calm before the storm. Trying to appear calm, Archer casually shuffled behind the couch. along the way, he gently pulled Tails with him.

Sonic seemed to pick up on Rin's bad mood. "Something wrong, Rin?"

The flippant usage of her first name was the final straw. Rin shot to her feet, eyes blazing, and screamed, "OF COURSE SOMETHING'S WRONG!"

In a flash Sonic was on the couch's back, roughly between Saber and Shirou. He then zipped back to his pillow to retrieve his chips and returned to the couch. Similarly, Tails had gone from hovering to clinging to Archer's shoulder, looking like an fur wrap with sneakers.

"You went out in public!" Rin ranted, "Hundreds of people saw you! Including the news! What were you *thinking*!?"

Sonic ate a chip. "I was thinking, 'Oh no, the evil Dr. Eggman is going to destroy the school,' and 'Here I come to save the day'."

And you thought that justifies being so reckless!?"

As Mage and Hedgehog bantered, Shirou began to feel a little annoyed at Rin. Sure, Sonic's actions may not have been well thought-out, but he only did them because people's lives were in danger. As a would-be hero himself, he wanted to rise to Sonic's aid.

Saber must have thought similarly, for she said, "Given the circumstances, Rin, there was little else he could do. The situation was out of our hands."

"And *you!* " Rin pointed at Saber, "Why did you appear like that? Do you have any idea how risky that was?"

"I was hoping to lure Eggman away from the school with my aura," SAber explained, "But I did not expect him to call my bluff like that."

Judging from the face underneath her pigtails, Saber's reasoning did not please Rin. Shirou decided to intervene.

"Look, I know that today's been...exciting, Tohsaka- *san* , but I don't see what else could be done," The red-haired Master said, "Eggman forced our hand."

"Unless you think saving innocent lives is a bad thing." Sonic put in suddenly.

Rin's mouth opened, but no words came out. Shutting it, she paused for a moment, then tried to make her retort. Instead of the snappy disregard she wanted to make, silence followed. Eventually, she pressed the palm of her 'pointing dramatically' hand against her forehead.

"I...get what you guys are saying," She sighed, "But...gah! this is so frustrating. There hasn't been anything like this since the 4th War."

"What do you mean?" Asked Tails.

"The Caster team were a pair of psychopaths," Rin said bluntly, "They ignored the rules of the Holy War entirely and went on a killing

spree." She stopped, her lips beginning to tremble.

Did she lose someone to those people? Shirou thought.

Regaining her composure, Rin continued. "Eventually, it got so bad that the Church overseer at the time declared a temporary ceasefire so the other Masters could work together to defeat Caster."

"Then, why don't we do the same?" Shirou asked, "Have Kotomine call a truce and join forces with the other Masters to fight Eggman?"

Although Shirou said it as if it was simple, Saber knew it would be anything but. She recalled that insane Caster, the bug-eyed madman Gilles de Rais. In his twisted obsession, he believed Saber to be Jeanne d'Arc. When Saber refused to enable the delusion, he summoned horrors to set upon the world. Terrible masses of tentacles and fangs, the stuff of ones deepest, most primal nightmares. And despite what Rin said, the Masters of that War did not come together so seamlessly.; Like proud Mages are wont to do, they continued to fight amongst themselves. It was only after Caster conjured his most fearsome beast, a gargantuan abomination that no gas leak could cover up, did a few Servants, including herself, band together to destroy the monster. From what she had seen of the current Masters through their Servants' actions, it would be the same.

And although they knew less of the Fourth Grail War than Saber did, both Rin and Archer seemed to share the lady knight's opinion on allying with the other Masters, if their expressions were any indication.

"I'll talk to Kotomine tomorrow morning," Rin said tiredly, "School's closed, so that'll give us some time to prepare for...everything."

"Let's just hope that the situation doesn't get worse..."

At Homurahara Academy, a clean-up operation of epic proportions was being implemented. As Construction workers stripped down what was left of Franky's body, others were scattered all over the courtyard, collecting debris that had been blown off when the robot exploded. Inside the school proper, soldiers patrolled the hallways, retrieving pieces of destroyed Badniks and making sure that there were no more working models lurking in the shadows. Even in the dark of the night government trucks were being loaded, their cargo shipped to undisclosed locations for further study.

The only person not involved in the sweep was Stuart. Standing on the roof, he spoke into his phone.

"Yes, I understand. Try and keep today's events restricted to the country. To the region, if possible. Whatever's happening here must be bigger than any of us could have realized," Stuart said, "...No, I don't think the two are connected. He paused to listen. "Look, the creatures being sighted ten years ago looked more like starfish. Not spikey, furry people," He sighed, "Listen, Twice gave me footage of a foreign woman interacting with another of these things. Have Bazett McRemitz put under surveillance if possible. And Emiya Shirou, too. I don't know if it's a coincidence, but he might be involved in this as well.

"Kiritsugi's accomplice from ten years ago, the blond girl partnered with his wife, has returned to Japan."

TO BE CONTINUED

Tiger Dojo

Taiga: You wanted it! You asked for it! You're getting it! It's the Tiger Dojo! With your *sensei*, Fujimura Taiga!

Illya: And the Number 1 student!

Taiga: This was such an eventful chapter! The Eggman has appeared! I was completely shocked! What a big mustache!

Illya: And what a big pain! But now *Onii-chan* can focus on the Holy War, and stuff! But Eggman might interfere with that, too. I hope he doesn't learn about the Grail, that's supposed to go to Einzbern family.

Taiga: And now, for our Q/A! Our first question comes from Thunder-dragon. Actually, he had a lot of them, but they all amount to this; "Which version of Sonic is this?"

Illya: Version? I don't get it.

Taiga: Sonic has been adapted many times, into comics, shows, and even other types of video games. In this story, the Sonic appearing in Fuyuki is the one from the games, where continuity does not matter as much as it does in Fate. Although, I would not be surprised if elements from the other adaptations might show up.

Illya: Like that guy, Stuart? He's from the Sonic X anime, right?

Taiga: Not quite. The Stuart that appears in this story is *based* on the one from the anime. More like, he's the Stuart as if he was born in the Fate universe. Mmm, a Stuart- *san* of my very own...

Illya: Ugh, the Tiger's on the prowl...

Taiga: Don't call me Tiger! (*Hits Illya*)

Illya: Ouch!

Taiga: Also, we at Tiger Dojo have been receiving many requests for different Sonic characters to appear in the story, as well for different plot elements to be included. To that, the author has announced that all the Sonic characters that will appear in the story were already aboard the *Egg Saucer* when it transported to Fuyuki. Furthermore, he has already prepared an overview of how the story shall play out. If anyone has successfully guessed what will happen, congratulations! And that is all the time we have left!

Illya: Thank you for reading! Write reviews and keep favoriting us!
Good bye!

The Supernatural

Chapter 5: *The SuperNatural*

Homurahara Academy was closed. While that would normally be the case at night, circumstances had increased the duration of its downtime. Thanks to the damage caused by Eggman's attack, its doors would not be opening for a week, at least- possibly longer, depending on how much time would be needed for the investigation. Even after clearing out the robot parts, officials still wanted to examine the area, in hopes of finding the mysterious prize Eggman coveted.

They weren't the only ones.

With only the moon and stars for light, Knuckles prowled about. He had seen the news report on Eggman and Sonic's battle, and decided to investigate the school. While he was pleased to see that one of his friends was doing well, the Echidna was curious if there really was a Chaos Emerald around. Ducking under the police taped that blocked all possible entrances, he entered the high school. He was pleased to see that not only was Sonic doing all right, but had also made a friend, of sorts. He could only hope that Tails and Amy had similar luck. He really didn't want them to fall into the clutches of some villain. Whoever the Bug Queen was, she was clearly a step up from Rin and Archer. More importantly, Knuckles was curious about Eggman's intentions.

From what I saw, Eggman came here because there might be a Chaos Emerald, Knuckles thought, If there is, then we'll be one step closer to getting home...!

As he walked through the empty school halls, Knuckles tried to extend his senses. Years of guarding the Master Emerald on Angel Island had given Knuckles an innate knack for sensing the power of the giant jewel, and its servants, the seven Chaos Emerald.

However, this knack was limited to detecting the Emeralds if they were near. Once once close enough, he was forced to pinpoint their location by means of the 'warmer-colder' method, with no real indication which way to go.

...!

Knuckles suddenly felt a chill go up his spine. It didn't feel like a Chaos Emerald. The pulse of the Emeralds was more like a tingle of static electricity. This, on the other hand...Knuckles could only compare it to a spider, a hairy tarantula, crawling up the back of his neck. There was no way it could be an Emerald. But there was also no way he could ignore it. Good or bad, he was going to check it out...!

Rider wasn't sure what she was going to find at the school. She really didn't.

After Shinji fled the school during Eggman's invasion, he eventually calmed down and ordered Rider to go back and take a look around. His logic was that Saber's Master, Emiya Shirou, had been awfully quick to explain why the mad doctor and his robots attacked Homurahara Academy. The explanation (As devised by Shinji) was that Shirou clearly wanted Shinji and Rider to get away from the school so he could look for this "Chaos Emerald" himself. After all, since Shirou rejected Shinji's offer to join forces, they weren't allies, but enemies that the Master of Saber wanted an advantage over. Rider, personally, thought that this train of thought didn't run on straight tracks, but did not resist the order to search the school. She knew that if she gave Shinji any lip *now*, he would definitely take it out on Sakura. And that poor girl was only starting to recover...

Rider sensed someone approaching and hid herself. The figure that appeared in the hall brought up bad memories. Despite being blinded, Rider's other senses were so well-honed that even without her sight, she could still discern the shapes of those around her. This meant that she could count Knuckles quills as they hung down his

head, and figure out the size of his sneakers as they clopped on the floor.

Another one! She thought bitterly. She still felt the embarrassment from having lost to Sonic the other day. No doubt that this new spirit animal and Sonic were connected...another familiar controlled by Emiya Shirou, possibly.

Safe on the ceiling, Rider was out of Knuckles' sight and could 'observe' him at her leisure. She watched as he forced a window open. With his fist. Even though there was a door right next to it.

Did he have to break it? Rider thought, wincing at the sound of glass shattering. She considered her next option. Judging from the direction Knuckles was walking in, the Echidna was heading towards one of the sigils she had placed in preparation for Blood Fort Andromeda. She recalled how close Shirou had been to one- the exact one Knuckles was heading for. She realized that despite Shinji's low opinion on Emiya's intelligence, the Master of Saber must have been smarter than that. Sending a familiar to investigate the place showed good strategic foresight- if Knuckles indeed belonged to Shirou. After a moment's consideration, she disregarded that notion; She didn't sense any Mana in the Echidna that linked him to Shirou. In retrospect, he was probably like one of those Nekos that ran the cafe Shinji took his 'girl club' to a few nights ago.

Which meant that the unsteady truce Shinji proposed did not apply. After all, she needed to replenish her Mana *somehow...*

Knuckles didn't know what to make of the weird circle in the ground. He didn't know what it was, where it came from, or why it seemed to be glowing. All he could say for certain that it was the *creepiest* thing he had even seen. For some reason it reminded him of the *faux*-Master Emerald Shrine he had seen in the Space Colony ARK's central core, juuust before the hideous Ultimate Lifeform Prototype materialized and tried to kill him.

In any case, the creepy vibe he was getting from the circle had distracted him from his Emerald hunt. While a part of him really, really, *really* wanted to know more about it, Knuckles knew he had to get back on the search. Besides, with his luck, the darn thing would probably summon ghosts, or whatever-

A metal spike attached to a chain shot out from nowhere. Knuckles jumped aside, just narrowly dodging it. The instant he landed, the chain retracted as a second spike/chain combo was launched, forcing Knuckles to dodge again. This went on for several seconds, and it took only have that time for Knuckles to get angry. Not only was he being attacked, but his attacker didn't even have the chops to come out from the shadows!

When I get ahold of that jerk... Knuckles thought, and in doing so came up with an idea. When the next chain shot his way, the Echidna didn't move. Instead, he reached out and *grabbed* the links! He felt his hidden assailant try to pull the chain back, and held his ground.

Rider was a bit surprised that her target stronger than he looked, but in his actions, Knuckles was leaving himself open- and she had another chain, ready to throw. And as she prepared to unleash it, something unexpected happened.

Knuckles *pulled. Hard.*

Rider found herself being yanked off of her feet and flying forward the Echidna. She quickly let go of the links, but it was too late. Her momentum carried her. But Knuckles wasn't going to just wait for her to come. The minute he saw someone coming, he ran. A spiked fist slammed into Rider's chest, sending her flying.

"A woman, huh?" Knuckles thought aloud. Her curvaceous figure reminded him of Rouge the Bat. "It's always a woman..."

Rider landed on her feet, but almost fell to her knees. It was all she could do not to cough up blood. Forcing herself up, she did her best to glare at Knuckles through her blindfold.

But Knuckles was done waiting. He built his speed up with a Spin Dash before charging at Rider. The purple-haired Servant jumped aside, and heard the crashes as Knuckles' rushing form collided with a tree, followed by the tree falling over. Getting up, Knuckles barely had time to adjust before Rider lunged at him, chains and spikes ready. Knuckles delivered a powerful uppercut, which Rider blocked. However, she could feel the force through her links, and found herself, for the umpteenth time;

Why do I have to have someone like Shinji for a Master?

"Wait, wait, wait! Rider's Master is *Shinji*? "

That intelligent question was asked by Rin. The topic of the 'team meeting' had shifted from pondering strategies against Eggman's forces when Shirou revealed the identity of another Master- or so he thought. Rin was skeptical, of course, for a number of reasons. Off to the side, Tails, fiddling with the Miles Electric, and Sonic, lying lazily on the couch, looked up with interest.

"Shinji told me so himself, and Rider followed his orders." Shirou explained, and further elaborated his encounter with his blue-haired classmate. Though he kept it to himself, Archer was pleased. At least *that* piece of the history he remembered was unaltered. Saber, on the other hand, wasn't. A third Servant had been at the school, and she hadn't even noticed. If Rider hadn't been controlled by Shinji, there was no telling what she would have done to Shirou.

"I can't believe it..." Rin murmured, more to herself.

"Why? You and Shirou are Mages, aren't you?" Tails asked, "What's wrong with one more 10th grade wizard?"

"But Shinji isn't *supposed* to be a Mage," Rin said, "The Matou were once a clan of prominent Mages, yeah, but now..."

"They aren't 'prominent' now?" Sonic asked, raising an eyebrow.

"That's right," Rin said, "Somewhere along the line, their lineage's magical potential began to diminish. Each generation yielded weaker Mages. From what I understand, Shinji wasn't supposed to have any Magecraft ability at *all*. "

"If it's that important, why doesn't Shirou ask Shinji about it?" Tails considered, "After all, if you guys are friends..."

"I'll try, if I can, but I'm not sure if I'll get a straight answer," Shirou replied, "As for us being friends...we used to be that way, but there's so much distance now, I have no idea what he's thinking."

"What I want to know if Rider will really keep her hands to herself," Sonic put in, "You told me when we first met that Servants attacked other people to recharge themselves if their Masters couldn't do it for them."

"And if Shinji's power is that poor, than Rider may continue her illicit activities," Saber said, "Unless he has used a Command Seal to bind her movements."

"And that's even if we can trust Shinji to do that at all," Rin put in, "We're lucky he was stupid enough to come out in the open, but I don't think we should take what he says at face value. For now, let's still assume he and Rider are enemies and keep an eye on them."

Shirou fidgeted uncomfortably. He didn't like where this talk was going. True, Shinji had a somewhat difficult personality, and the two of them had had something of a falling out, but Shirou still wanted to give his friend the benefit of the doubt. Then again, after finding out that Rin was a Mage, he was starting to wonder just how much he knew about anything.

"So, whaddya think about this shrine-samurai Shinji mentioned?" Sonic asked, "Sound legit?"

Rin hummed. "That, actually, sounds plausible. The Ryuudou Shrine is built on several intersecting leylines. A good place for a Mage to restore their Prana."

"According to Issei- another friend of mine," Shirou told Sonic and Tails, "Most of the monks have left, save for Kazuki- *sensei* and his fiancée."

" *Sensei* 's getting married?" Rin asked, surprised. "Right now?"

"Don't worry, Rin, you'll find someone someday, you're still young," Sonic said jokingly, "After all, it's not a race."

"That's not it, you blue *baka* !" Rin snarled, her cheeks turning red, "I mean, it's a weird coincidence it's happening around the Holy Grail War."

"This bride may in fact be another Master." Saber suggested thoughtfully.

"That's just what I was thinking," Rin agreed, "With some hypnosis, it'd be easy for a Mage to convince a normal person that they're engaged. And since Kazuki -*sensei* is such a mysterious person, anyone could pop up and claim to be an old friend or part of an arranged marriage. The real question is whether or not the samurai is a Servant."

"We should investigate the area," Archer said, "See if there's a Boundary Field surrounding the temple, and scout out the samurai."

"I think I can help with that," Tails said, screwing the cover of the Miles Electric closed. "I just expanded the range of the ME's energy tracker by combining it with its GPS. If I did my calculations right, then we should be able to check locate abnormal power sources all over the city."

Tails placed the Miles Electric on the coffee table, and everyone gathered around. While most of the group watched the screen light up with interest, only Rin's expression remained dubious. She still didn't want to believe that a machine could detect Prana, and had been hoping that Archer's theory had been wrong. A grid appeared, and a large circle appeared in the center.

"All right, that's where we are," Tails explained for the audience. "Now, if I widen the scope..."

The map zoomed out, showing a map of the city. In different areas, other dots appeared.

"What are those? Chaos Emeralds? Servants?" Shirou asked.

"If you used your head, you'd realize that they're too wide to be either of them. Those are probably the Boundary Fields created by Mages to protect their homes," Archer said, and pointed at one glowing dot. "Judging from the position, I'd say that's the Matou Manor, where Shinji lives."

Tails pushed a few buttons and a list of numbers appeared. They did not appear comprehensible to any of the Masters or Servants.

"Hmm, not bad. It's higher than any of the other signals," Tails commented, and glanced at Rin. "But, I thought you said the Matous couldn't do magic."

"Shinji shouldn't be, but there's one other Matou who could make a Boundary Field," Rin said, as a pain appeared in her heart. "... Shinji's grandfather, the current clan head, Matou Zouken."

She grimaced as she thought about the shriveled old man. Looking at him, it was easy to mistake the old miser for a mummy...one that had come to life and sought vengeance. She had only seen him once, as a little girl. The day when...

Rin shook off that thought. She couldn't afford to be distracted by bad memories now. "If that's the Matou place, than this part..." She tapped the screen, causing a smudge. "...must be the church."

"Churches are magic?" Sonic asked.

"They are when their head priest can do Magecraft," Saber said, "Masters taking part, as well as those that have lost their Servants, may go to the church for aid or council. A proper Boundary Field is necessary to ensure their protection."

"Okay..." Tails entered a few more commands, and the map's focus shifted towards another source-point. "Any idea what this is?"

"That's the Ryuudou Temple," Archer said, "Judging from the readings, I'd say that a Master is using it as their base."

"Tails, widen the view, would ya?" Sonic asked. After Tails complied, he nodded. "Okay, anybody got a cell phone?"

Rin frowned, and then walked off. A minute later, she returned, holding a small, stylish cell phone. "Here," Off of Shirou's look, she explained, "It was a gift from Kotomine. I don't use it very much. It's not like I need it."

As one, everyone else thought, "Translation: I can't get it to do what I want." Rather than voicing that very accurate opinion, Sonic flipped the phone open and turned it on. After a minute, he smiled.

"Nice, it's got a camera, and plenty of space in the card," Sonic said, and stuffed the phone into his glove. "Be back in ten."

"What?" Was all Rin managed to say before Sonic vanished in a rush of movement. They heard the slam of a door shutting. Rin looked back and forth between the empty space and the direction of the shut door with a thunderstruck look on her face.

"Nice of him to close the door on his way out." Archer. said, smirking. His words were supposed to have the dual effect of both lightening the mood and further annoying Rin.

He succeeded in the latter. "Arrgh!" Rin shouted, almost tugging out her pigtails. "What does he think he's *doing*!? "

"Off hand, I'd say he's going to check out the Temple," Tails said, and shut off the Miles Electric. It'll be a few minutes until he gets back," He looked at Shirou. "Wanna help me with the *Tornado* ? Archer brought back more scrap!"

"Sure, I'd love to." Shirou said, starting to feel excited. Ever since Sonic told him about it, Shirou had wanted to get a look at the bi-plane from another world. He wondered what would happened if he did a Structural Analysis...

"It's a bit more advanced than kitchen sinks or room heaters," Archer said, moving. "With your clumsy hands, the damage might get worse."

"Get bent." Shirou retorted, as the two of them followed Tails out of the room.

"H-hey! Hold on! I never said..." Rin looked to Saber, trying really hard not to look as helpless as she felt. "What are you doing? Go after Sonic! Stop him before he shows himself again!"

"Rin, I know his attitude is a bit aggravating, but I don't believe he's completely foolhardy," The blond Servant said, pausing to eat a chip. "So far, Sonic has only revealed himself to those whose lives were in jeopardy. And with his speed, chasing after him would be a waste of effort. At this point, we can only have faith that he will not endanger himself."

Rin stared, a mixture of rage and confusion rolling inside of her. When she and Emiya agreed to join forces, she did not believe for an instant that it would be an equal partnership. While she claimed

that Shirou had as much say in their battle strategy, the truth was that Rin hoped everything they did would be as she saw fit. Emiya, in her eyes, was an unskilled, talentless Master who's only purpose was to keep Saber on the field to aid Archer. While she kinda-sorta-maybe-like-liked him as a person, she knew that deep down personal ties and social obligations were secondary to her duty as the Tohsaka Master to claim the Holy Grail.

But ever since Sonic and Tails showed up, everything had fallen apart. Sonic was not only as idiotic as Shirou, but seemed to be purposely enabling that moronic hero complex her red-haired classmate carried. And with his gadgets, Tails had provided a very definite means of tracking other Masters and Servants, even those who could hide their presence with their Magecraft. Since all illusions focused on disrupting and misleading a living creature's senses, a machine could easily bypass those shadows and see what was truly there. But as a Mage, Rin knew that Magecraft wasn't a tool- it was a way of life that she had to adhere to. But right now it appeared that, thanks to these tools brought in by the outsiders, one could achieve victory without Magecraft. And that, she realized as she thought on the matter, was the source of her anger.

The idea that all of her training, everything she had been raised to believe in and depend on, had been meaningless.

At Homurahara Academy, Knuckles and Rider had reached an impasse. Rider, with her agility, should have had the advantage. Even if bound to an utter weakling like Shinji, her abilities were far beyond that of a normal human. Even the most athletic mortal would be nothing to her abilities.

But the same could be said for Knuckles. His punches were strong enough to smash Eggman's robots to pieces, and could only be stopped by the thickest of walls. And Rider's agility was of little help. Knuckles was only somewhat slower than Sonic the Hedgehog, the fastest thing in the universe. And after numerous brawls with the Blue Blur, his reflexes, honed by a solitary practice of the martial

arts, were good enough to keep up with Rider's attacks. Ultimately, this meant that while Rider couldn't land a direct hit on Knuckles, the reverse was true as well.

Up until Knuckles lost his temper. "Would you *hold still!*?" He roared, and rushed at Rider. The Servant easily dodged him, and prepared another of her chains. She watched as Knuckles raced into the bushes, slamming into a tree. Before she could throw another spike at the Echidna, a cracking was heard. The tree then fell over, in a manner that would make Paul Bunyan proud. But before it could hit the ground, it stopped.

"Taaake this!" Knuckles yelled, and let the lumber fly.

Of course he can throw the trees. Rider thought irritably as she jumped to avoid concussion by tree-trunk. As the wood sailed under her, Rider heard a loud crash, and remembered that her back had been to the school. No doubt whoever was in charge of repairs would be flabbergasted to find an uprooted tree where the back door used to be.

Landing on the ground, Rider noticed two things. One was that Knuckles was no longer in the bushes, or anywhere else on the property that she could sense. The second was that that there was something moving around underneath the ground. Rider put one and two together and got...

POW!

A blow to the jaw as Knuckles erupted from beneath the soil, delivering an uppercut. Once again, Rider found herself flying backwards as a direct result of meeting this force head-on. As she recovered and righted herself, she decided a change of tactics was in order. While she didn't want to flee from yet another battle, a retreat was clearly in order. She had searched the entire school before Knuckles had arrived, and found nothing that matched the description of the object Eggman sought. Furthermore, if this fight went on, it might attract the attention of another Servant. Rider

couldn't afford to fight another Servant right now, not during a fight like this. She felt her tummy ache and once again wondered if Knuckles (And Sonic, for that matter) were truly familiars or animal spirits. She had never encountered any of either type that were so strong in her lifetime...

Rider felt the presence of another Servant and realized that such theories were for less violent settings. She leapt away, making fast progress from the school. She needed a less turbulent way to recharge, and knew of a nightclub where the patrons left...off-guard.

"Yeah, you better run!" Knuckles shouted, shaking his trademark 'Fist of Rage' at Rider's retreating back. As she disappeared into the dark distance, he turned back to the school. "Now, where was I...?"

Knuckles went back into the building, climbing back through the window he broke. Pausing, the red Echidna looked out and around, as if he didn't trust the back yard with his own back. Then, he turned and resumed his search of the school.

Caster, dressed in her fine robes, stepped out from the shadows, gracefully ominous as ever. She was a bit sorry that Knuckles couldn't have finished Rider off. she even came all this way to provide some subtle aid. It would have been a relief to have one less enemy in the War, especially after the scare she received that afternoon. Scrying the Academy, the witch had gotten the worst scare of her life when Dr. Eggman's giant robot began taking potshots at the building. Seeing the first robot attack the night before was an entirely different matter; Back then, it was Saber and Archer's problem. This time, however, her own Master had been in danger, and finding the appropriate time to teleport him off of the property without arousing suspicion was nerve-wracking. Of course, that meant that she and Souchirou- *sama* had a few extra hours of 'alone time', which *almost* made up for it...

Caster fought off the blush forming as she looked at the circle Knuckles and Shirou had found. Judging from its Prana, it had been placed there by Rider. An alert spell? No, there was something more

ominous about it than that. No doubt it was just the first step in an stronger spell...a piece of Rider's Noble Phantasm, perhaps?

Whatever it was, there was no point in letting it be. Caster destroyed the sigil with barely a word. She decided to look around the school, to see if Rider had planted more magic circles. If she had, they too would have to be destroyed. She had invested far too much time and effort in this War to be outdone, especially by a Servant with such an idiotic Master.

As she floated around, she wondered what other surprises the War had to offer.

It was another boring, uneventful night for Assassin. The day had been amusing, at least. While his post at the temple gate didn't have a TV, he could still hear the explosions of Eggman's attack with his honed senses. And he had to admit, the sound of Caster's terrified shrieks, while damaging to his eardrums, had caused him to laugh out loud.

Speaking of eardrums, they were now picking up another, far less painful sound. Like hundreds of footsteps. Sensing trouble, Assassin reached for his sword, but did not draw it. He could see a figure at the bottom of the stairway, but only had a measly second to comprehend that before the figure was at the temple gate.

That's fast. Assassin thought, and recognized the creature standing in front of him as one of the two who had fought against Eggman's robot. Issei had filled him in on the entire fiasco when he returned from school. He could only presume that this was one Knuckles' missing friends.

"Hi, I'm with the board of tourism," Sonic said, casually twirling the cell phone in his hands. "Just need to ask a few questions, won't take long."

"And what do you need to know?" Asassin asked, curious. This wasn't what he had been expecting.

"First of all, are you a magic ghost?"

"What an odd term," Asassin replied, cocking his head thoughtfully. "If you want to be technical, than yes, I suppose I am." Being a spirit summoned by Magecraft with superhuman abilities was probably what he meant, right?

Sonic nodded. "Cool, cool. Next question- wait, hold on. I'm gonna need your name and occupation for the report."

Asassin bowed his head respectfully. "I am Sasaki Kojirou, also known as the Servant Asassin."

Sonic's left eyebrow shot up. That was too easy. He reached into his glove and pulled out a scrap of paper and a pen. He began to write on it. "Sasaki....Ko...ji..."

"If you're writing that in English, then the personal name is spelled with an 'ou'." Asassin put in helpfully.

Sonic gave the Servant a dry look. "I think I've signed enough autographs to know how 'Kojirou' is supposed to be spelled," One he finished, he looked intently at Asassin. "So, moving on, do you, or any member of your household, go out and attack innocent people?"

Asassin shook his head. "Not I. Due to the nature of my summons, I'm an incomplete Servant who cannot leave the strong leylines of the Ryuudou Temple. As such, my Master has me act as a guard dog, bound to keep people from entering or leaving the Temple at her will."

"Jeez, that must stink," Sonic rolled his eyes sympathetically, "Glad I'm not in your shoes."

"Your sympathy is touching."

"So, speaking of your boss, what's she like?" Sonic asked walking up to casually nudge Asassin in the legs. "Just between us guys."

"Oh, she's a very powerful sorceress," Asassin replied, "I can't say I'm fond of her personality, though. She's far too bossy, if you ask me."

"Yeah, I know the type." Sonic said, rolling his eyes.

Rin sneezed. Rubbing her nose, she wondered if someone was talking about her. If they were, they weren't saying kind things, judging from the slight headache that was forming.

Of course, any mage would get a headache if they were in Rin's position. Bearing witness to her home, an ancestral source of Magecraft, becoming a glorified pit station went against everything Rin had been raised to believe in. But, in spite of her very vocal and consistently ignored complaints, both her Servant, her ally in the War, and the *kitsune* that should have been the source of a thaumaturgical breakthrough continued to tinker with the machine in her backyard. Work was slow, because it was the middle of the night. Tails, Shirou, and Archer worked by improvised spotlights fashioned from lamps powered by extension cords. But in spite of the difficulty, Shirou seemed to be having the time of his life. Rin had never seen such a energetic expression on his face before.

He really is a failure of a Mage, The Tohsaka Master thought bitterly, Getting so happy to play with a machine. Anyone can do that.

Are you jealous, Rin? Archer asked telepathically. There was a certain smugness to his thoughts.

No!

Weren't you eager to impress Shirou with your superior Magecraft? Archer continued tauntingly, *Isn't that why you wanted to ally with him?*

Shut up!

Completely and blissfully ignorant of the telepathic exchange, Shirou held up a piece of the bi-plane's left wing as Tails used a portable welder to patch back onto the *Tornado* proper. To keep it steady, Shirou had to reinforce his arms. The heat from both his Mage Circuits and Tails' soldering caused a slight sweat to form.

"Annnnnd...done!" Tails said, turning off the welder. "All we need to do is let it cool. Hold on a for a second, Shirou."

Tails went around to the *Tornado* and opened a compartment on the side. He pulled out what looked like a futuristic snowboard. Shirou could see that it had vents on the sides, as well as some sort of port on one end. It was hard to make out the exact details in the dark, but it seemed to have a blue color scheme. Tails propped the board under the wing.

"Okay, you can let go," The fox said, "This will have to do for now, until the wing cools off."

Shirou released the wing, and his Reinforcement. As relief flooded into his arms, he glanced down at the thing Tails retrieved.

Tails' smile dropped when he noticed the redness in Shirou's cheeks. "Are you okay, Shirou? Did holding the wing hurt you?"

"No, I'm fine," Shirou half-lied, "I used my Magecraft to steady it. More importantly, what's that thing you pulled out?" He pointed at the board. "It looks a bit expensive for a prop."

"Oh, that?" Tails shrugged, "I'll get something else to hold it all up. Give me a minute."

"But, what is it?" Shirou asked.

"Oh, it's an Extreme Gear," Tails replied. At Shirou's blank look, he said. "Hmm, maybe your dimension calls them something else."

Basically, it's a personal propulsion device that utilizes momentum to ride air currents."

Shirou stared as he mentally translated Tails' words. "It's a board that can fly?" It sounded crazy, impossible...but so was everything else that had happened in the past few days.

Tails nodded. "You got it!"

"Hold it," That was Rin, walking up to them. She had been listening in by Reinforcing her ears, and had heard quite enough. "There is no way you're telling the truth now. You're suggesting that metal *thing*- " She pointed at the Extreme Gear. "-can fly?"

Tails didn't pick up on the passive-aggressive tone in Rin's voice. Instead, he nodded cheerily. "Sure! Here, let me show you."

Tails ran back to the *Tornado* and pulled out a second Extreme Gear from the compartment, this one orange. The little fox then flew up towards the roof of the Tohsaka Mansion.

"I'll need a good point to build up my speed!" Tails explained from above, "Okay, here I go!"

Tails leapt off of the roof, and went down. He put his feet on the board's top side and flipped on a switch. Going down, the Masters and Servants could hear a faint noise like a jet turning on. When Tails' descent reached the ground, there was a roar and suddenly the fox went from falling to gliding, racing around the grounds, several feet above the grass.

"He's...he's really flying..." Shirou said.

"At this point, nothing these guys do will surprise me." Archer commented, "I wonder how hard using that could be..."

Saber, who had remained silent during this period, suddenly spoke a single word. "Dibs."

The men looked at the stoic Servant with a little shock. Meanwhile, Rin, unable to take her eyes off of the fox, fumed slightly. Once again, Magecraft was being outdone. While she was glad that Tails didn't hurt himself, that wasn't enough to bury the resentment building inside of her.

"Hmph. It's not like he's doing that under his own power," The pigtailed Mage grumbled, walking back into the mansion. "All the work is being done by that metal plank."

Jealously doesn't become you, Archer chided. When he didn't get a response, he began to get worried.

Then suddenly Rin burst out from the door. Running into the yard, she dashed over to where Tails was and *yanked* him off of his Extreme Gear. Without a rider, the board began to lose control, flying off into the air. It soon lost momentum, and but almost hit the *Tornado*. Saber, acting quickly, caught the Extreme Gear before that could happen. Meanwhile, Rin dragged Tails back inside.

" *What the Hell is that thing?!* " Her voice exploded from within the walls.

Concerned, Shirou went in to see what was the matter. Archer and Saber followed, also curious. They soon found out what had Rin in such a fury; Against the wall in another room, a large machine had been built. It looked a great deal like a laundry washing machine, the kind with a window. Only this one had numerous additional tubes, panels, wires and other doodads sticking out of it. Standing in front of it, holding Tails by the cuff, Rin pointed a finger that appeared itching to unleash some offensive Magecraft.

"It's a Power Ring Synthesizer," Tails answered. His voice sounded a bit forced, no doubt due to Rin's grip. "I built it using the parts Archer brought back. Can you put me down?"

Rather than letting go of the fox, Rin lowered her index finger. Somewhat. "Synthesizer? What's that mean?"

"Sonic and I only have less than ten Rings between the two of us," Tails explained, "And we'll need more if we're going to fight Eggman and the other Servants."

"And your latest toy is going to fix that?" Archer asked, and gently pulled the fox out of Rin's grip.

Tails nodded, both as confirmation and thanks.

"But that's impossible," Rin argued, "There's no way a machine can create Magecraft. Magecraft can only be done by living creatures- and unless you've somehow imprisoned the soul of a demon in whatever is in that hunk of junk, I can't see it happening."

Tails chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah, I guess it does sound pretty wild when you hear about it for the first time. Let me explain. Sonic's Uncle Chuck discovered that the Power Rings were naturally formed by a phenomenon called..."

As Tails went into his lecture, Rin's normally honor-student level ability to receive and retain information suddenly stalled, resulting in her mind hearing this;

"... blah blah blah sciency-stuff, yadda-yadda, jargon, latin word, obscure vowel, I think you're super lame because you can't understand this blathering. Therefore, he theorized that it could be possible to duplicate this effect by utilizing et cetera, et cetera, big words, mathematics, also, your butt is way too big for a girl your age and you'll never get married, and more technobabble. Understand?" Tails asked once he finished.

Rin's left eye was twitching. Her cheeks had a red tinge that was somewhere between anger and embarrassment. Putting on a shaky smile, the schoolgirl said, "O-of course I did! It couldn't be simpler!" She laughed, sounding more like a runaway from the padded room than a proud Mage.

"Good, explain it to me." Archer deadpanned. He got a red-hot glare in response.

Tails didn't see the red flag. "That's good. It's not often I get to finish an explanation. Usually, whenever I try to describe this stuff to Sonic or one of the guys back home, they just say things like, 'Never mind, I'll take your word for it'," Tails glanced at Shirou. "How about you, Shirou? Do you have any questions?"

Looking even more awkward than his fellow mage, Shirou rubbed the back of his head awkwardly. "Umm...I'm sorry, Tails, but I think your science is too advanced for normal humans."

"That's because you're an idiot!" Rin suddenly shouted, and stepped in front of Shirou so her back was to Tails. She began to speak in a fast and frantic manner. "Something that's been bothering me is the fact that you suck at Magecraft! If you're going to be any use in our alliance..."

And on she went. As Rin ragged and lectured Shirou, Tails looked up at Archer, concerned.

"Boy, she sure shifted gears fast," The fox remarked. "Is something the matter?"

"Oh, nothing you need to be worried about." Archer replied, thinking. In his own timeline, he was the one who went to Rin for help with magecraft. But now, because of the influence of Sonic and Tails, Rin's sense of self-worth was being challenged. They're own abilities were proving to be far more useful in the War than her own skills. In order to regain her standing in Shirou's eyes as a useful ally, she forced herself into the role of a teacher.

Meanwhile, Saber stepped up to the Ring Synthesizer and examined it. She would never fully understand magic, or technology, that she knew. But she knew enough about either subject that there was no such thing as a free ride; Merlin had made it clear that no matter what method you used, there had to be a tradeoff.

"Tails," She began, looking at the fox. "Are the Rings created by this technology identical to the ones you and Sonic brought from your world?"

Tails hummed, and stroked his left tail. "Well, there are a few key differences. Unlike naturally-occurring Rings, the ones made by the Synthesizer are less stable."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, if you take a hit and drop your Rings, the Synthesized ones won't take a few seconds to vanish. They'll disappear immediately." Tails explained.

Saber rubbed her chin in thought. To herself more than anyone, she said, "So, the recreations are inferior to the real thing..."

"True," Archer put in, "But even a weak copy can be useful, depending on how it's used."

Saber regarded Archer. She wondered if there was some hidden meaning to his words. And there was something else. According to Shirou, Archer's stats were, well, terrible. Yet his skill was so great that he could even briefly fight equally with not just Lancer, but her as well. Yet his insistence on pragmatic but unquestionable unchivalrous methods reminded her too much of Kiritsugu.

Who are you, Archer? the lady knight thought. Before she could say anything, a beeping was heard.

Tails turned on his communicator. "Sonic?"

" Hey, just want you guys to know I've gotten a good look at that samurai, " Sonic's said through the speaker. *" He says he's a Servant, an Assassin named Sasaki Kojirou. "*

Archer raised an eyebrow. *So, that part of history remains untouched.* He wasn't surprised that Assassin had given his name

(Although Saber clearly was). The Assassin he remembered had been a very upfront and courteous person...a true samurai.

" *He just gave you his identity?* " Saber asked.

"Yeah, even let me take a few pics," Sonic replied, running along the night street.

" *Did you get actually get a look at the Master?* " A new voice-Archer's- asked.

"Nah, according to Samurai Sam, his boss went out for the night," Sonic said. He paused to grab a lamp post and swing around a corner. "I couldn't get in myself, he wouldn't let me. Dude's crazy fast with the sword. Plus, I think there's some kinda forcefield around the mountain. Since he says he couldn't leave the temple, I got bored and left."

It was Tails' turn to talk. " *What are you gonna do now?* "

"I'm gonna give the city another run around, see if I can find Knuckles or Amy," Sonic replied, "Then I think I'll just head back to Shirou's and-" A scream reached his ears. "-Hold on, something just came up."

Sonic jumped, bounced off of a building wall, and rushed off towards the source of the scream.

Lancer looked around, an annoyed frown on his face. "Again"

Before him was a young woman, possibly the age of a college student. Shaking, she took a deep breath and screamed. Her voice was trembling, as would anyone who had a red spear pointed at their chest.

Lancer glanced at his surroundings, a sense of impatience starting to worm its way into his head. Then something even worse appeared in his head- His Master's words.

What are you doing? Kotomine asked. Even as a mental projection, his voice sounded aggravated.

You wanted me to catch speedy spirit, right? Lancer retorted, *Well, this should bring him out. Guy likes to play hero.*

The lady suddenly stopped screaming, and began to cough. Rolling his eyes, Lancer passed her a bottle of water for her to drink. A bit confused, the girl took a long sip. She began to inch away, but Lancer just put his spear forward another inch. Resigned, she began to scream again.

You're just going to attract unwanted attention, Kotomine argued, *Enter your astral form and search the city, before another Servant finds you.*

Hey, if you've got a problem with how I do things, why don't you use a Command Seal and make me change tactics? Lancer shot back, *Otherwise...*

" You again?"

Lancer turned away from the woman and his expression turned eager. Standing right before him was Sonic the Hedgehog.

See? Told you so. Lancer gloated. He felt a sense of exasperation from his Master, and his satisfaction increased.

"Oh, wow!" The woman cried happily, "It's the Blue Tanuki!"

Sonic gave her a look as Lancer laughed. "Tanuki? I'm a Hedgehog. Check the quills."

She nodded, and began to look between Sonic and Lancer in trepidation.

Lancer shrugged. "All right, you can go. Try to stay out of trouble, gorgeous."

A bit put off, the lady began to back away, before breaking off into a run.

"So, the damsel in distress was just bait to lure me out," Sonic noted, rolling his eyes. "Gosh, like I haven't seen that a hundred times before."

Lancer took a fighting stance. "Yeah, well, it was better than looking for you. We've got a duel to finish."

"Finish?" Sonic raised an eyebrow. "Dude, I *won* that fight. Or did you lose your memory along with your hearing?"

Lancer growled, "In this War, the fight's never over until someone *dies!* "

Lancer lunged at Sonic. Sonic zipped out of the way, but had no time to relax. As before, Lancer's assault was relentless, perhaps even more so this time. Using his spear as a pole, Lancer vaulted from where his blow missed and launched himself at the Hedgehog in a flying kick. As he soared, he repositioned his spear so that it was pointing at Sonic. Sonic jumped up in the air to dodge it. At first Lancer thought the fight was won- Sonic had essentially made himself an easy target in the air. Then Sonic did a Homing Shot, hitting Lancer in the shoulder.

This attack was far different from the other times Sonic hit Lancer. Before, those were just simple punches and kicks, albeit done at super-speed. This time, Sonic's entire body was spinning. It was spinning at such a speed that whatever it hit would grind away. What hit Lancer was the same force that shattered so many of Eggman's robots. Being a Servant, even one bound to an inferior Master, he wasn't going to fall to pieces just from that. Still, it *hurt*.

"Arrgh!" Lancer shouted in pain.

Sonic landed a few feet away and crouched, ready to move at a given notice. His first thought was that Lancer would be upset to have gotten a serious wound, but then he saw that instead of the angry frown that should have been there, the spearman's face had an eager smile growing. Sonic felt a shiver up his spine.

Sonic thought, *I hit him with enough force to shred a robot to pieces, and he's smiling! Does he like getting hurt, or was the Sonic Spin not enough? I'm starting to wish I had some backup, like Saber, Knuckles...heck, I'll even take Amy!*

"Wah-choo!" Amy sneezed.

"Bless you." Bazett said.

"Thanks."

In the solitude of the Fuyuki night, the two of them walked the streets. Where, neither of them knew. Emotions were mixed that day. They had seen the newscast on Eggman's attack on the city, and Amy had wanted to go out there and save the day. Bazett, however, had adamantly refused to let her out of their hotel room. As an Enforcer of the Mage's Association, she wasn't about to let an animal spirit go about in public, especially to an area that was being televised. The problem solved itself...by creating an entirely new set of problems for Bazett. Sonic's showboating was something she had been forewarned about from Amy, but the masked warrior who accompanied him had taken Bazett by surprise. She could only assume that it was a Servant. No Mage worth their circuits would go out in public like that. From what Lord El-Melloi II had told her, his own Servant during the Fourth had acted very reckless with his own identity, even going as far as to do home shopping in his true name. The Servant that fought against Eggman with Sonic must have been of a similar nature- Chivalrous to the point of stupidity.

"Someone must be talking or thinking about me," Amy remarked, and her eyes began to sparkle. "Ooh! Maybe it's Sonic, missing my

company!"

Bazett chuckled wearily. Amy was certainly dedicated to Sonic. She wondered what it was like to be so in love...or obsessed. She glanced at a street sign to confirm that they were going in the right direction.

Although their initial strategy was to go and scope out the Fuyuki Church, that changed with Eggman's attack. While Bazett wasn't sure if there really was a Chaos Emerald at the school, but she couldn't let a powerful artifact lying out for anyone to stumble onto. Amy agreed with this, as she felt one of her missing friends would be there as well.

"It'll probably be Knuckles," The pink hedgehog said, "If there's any treasure-hunting to be done, he's the one to do it."

"Let's hope he hasn't found anything yet," Bazett put in, "It'll be easy to keep a lid on things if we can keep at least *one* of your friends supervised..." She heard a sound like glass breaking. "What was that?"

Amy pointed. "Over there!"

No more than a block away, large figures could be seen breaking into a street side shop. And thanks to the working street lights, it was easy to see that they were some Egg Pawns, three of them to be precise. Two seemed to be holding something, but it was hard to tell exactly what from the distance.

"Those Badniks are robbing that store!" Amy declared, and whipped out her hammer. "Let's get 'em!"

Before Bazett could stop her, Amy charged at the robots. Briefly impressed at how quick Amy was in spite of her smaller legs, Bazett knew that she couldn't let this go on. Luckily, no one was watching, but there was no point taking chances. Taking a moment to cast a Boundary Field, Bazett strengthened her legs and shot after Amy.

She was past the pink Hedgehog in a second and at the store in even less time. Swinging her legs, she kicked on Egg Pawn, sending it flying into a another building, whereupon it exploded spectacularly. Another Egg Pawn dropped its load and advanced on Bazett, only to receive a punch that sent it flying into the street. It also exploded. The third looked about in confusion, as if weighing its options, when Amy suddenly jumped down onto it and crushed it with her hammer. The robot exploded, and a bright green birdie flew out from the wreckage.

"Nice going!" Amy gave Bazett a thumbs up. "You took down two of them! Pretty good, for a rookie!"

Bazett smirked. If only Amy knew that as an enforcer of the Mage's Association, she had fought far more dangerous things than these machines. She doubted her fellow Enforcers would have faired as well; Most relied on their spells to directly attack or misdirect their targets. Bazett, on the other hand, preferred to enhance herself with runes. It was an tactic that caught most conventional mages off-guard.

Speaking of getting caught, Bazett took stock of the place the Badniks had attacked. For some reason, they had targeted a pet store. Several cages had been knocked over. The floor was littered with confused cats and dogs that were barking and hissing frantically, trying to make sense of what had happened.

"Why here, of all places?" Bazett said, "I don't sense anything like those jewels you described."

Amy frowned. "That creep Eggman likes to catch critters and stuff them inside his robots. He was probably planning to do the same to these little guys."

Bazett's mind was instantly bombarded by an image of a cute little bunny. That bunny was picked up by a claw very like the kind found in claw prize grabbers, and held over another Egg Pawn, with its head flipped up like the lid of a garbage can. The bunny was

dropped into the robot, whose eyes began to glow. It was so nonsensical to imagine that the Irish woman suddenly developed a migraine just thinking about it. If Amy was talking about a Mage, maybe she could wrap her head around the idea. Using living creatures as a source of power or something to modify was something the more...the less moral mages did.

Amy seemed to sense Bazett's confusion, for she added, "Hey, you don't need to tell me that's weird and horrible. But, you know, 'mad scientist', right?"

"Yes, that would explain a lot...without actually explaining anything," Bazett said, "I think that after getting Lancer back, we should focus our efforts on dealing with Eggman."

"Duh!" Amy nodded, "Maybe you can figure out where he's hiding by looking into a crystal ball."

Bazett resisted the urge to sigh. The sheer sincerity of Amy's statement only made it more annoying. Her new friend seemed to have a very romanticized idea of just how Magecraft worked. Perhaps it would be that easy for the mages of Amy's world. From what she had described, people with special powers were commonplace...or, more likely, Amy just lived in an area where such people were commonplace.

Before the Enforcer could explain that her own divination skills were not strong enough to find Eggman as easy as snapping her fingers, she stopped. It was Bazett's turn to see something unusual.

Amy noticed Bazett's silence. "What's wrong? Do you see more Badniks?"

Bazett pointed up. On top of a building, she could something large, and golden. Whatever it was, it was spinning and sparkling in the starlight and moonlight.

Amy looked where Bazett was pointing. While she couldn't make her eyes stronger with magic like the Irish woman, her own night vision wasn't bad. She could see it too- and she knew what it was.

"Oh my gosh, it's a Special Zone entrance!" Amy was positively squealing with delight. She grabbed Bazett's arm. "Quick, we have to get up there! Before it disappears!"

Still a bit confused, Bazett decided not to question it by now. Activating her runes, she took hold of Amy and leapt up to the roof. Once there, she got a better look at this so-called "Special Zone".

It was gigantic ring, the diameter of its hole easily the size of her total height. As it spun in the air, Bazett realized that she couldn't actually see through the hole- within what should have been empty space were shifting colors.

"Amy, what did you say that was?" Bazett asked, putting up her guard.

"It's a Special Zone!" Amy explained eagerly, "It's kinda like a private universe where Chaos Emeralds hide in. Oh! And we can get some Rings, too! Let's go!"

Amy ran in, and Bazett was forced to chase after her. As the two jumped into the Ring's hole, neither noticed the creeping shadow close behind...

There were colors *everywhere* .

A barrage of rainbows, twisted into shapes and shades the likes of which she had never assault Bazett's eyes. She was tumbling down a void, but not necessarily down. Gravity and direction had no meaning in this place. Eventually, she hit a wall. Thankfully, the wall's color scheme, while also shifting, was a bit duller than the rest of the...Special Zone's, making it a little easier to see. Before she could get her bearings, Bazett felt the wall tilt. It soon became a floor for

her to stand on, before becoming an opposing wall. She fell against a similarly moving platform. The entire place was spinning!

"Don't touch any bright red spots!" Amy called out, from far away. She was jumping from place to place, trying to keep her footing. "And be sure to grab some Rings if you can!"

There *were* Rings. Smaller, much smaller than the one the two entered to reach this place. They were floating in the air, almost taunting Bazett with their defiance of gravity.

Refusing to let herself be tossed around, Bazett caught herself as she fell against the next platform in a perfect handstand. With her Rune-enforcements and combat training, she was able to easily keep up with Amy as the two navigated this strange, multicolored labyrinth.

This world...where could it have come from? Bazett thought, *These places seem commonplace in Amy's world, but this is the first I've seen of them here,* A thought occurred. *Did the appearance of Amy and her friends in our world create these...Special Zones?* Not for the first time, Bazett wished she could consult the great Wizard Marshal, Zelretch. As a master of the fabled Second Magic, he would surely be able to answer her questions...sadly, Zelretch would also just as well refuse to help for his own amusement. In fact, it wouldn't surprise her if Zelretch had a hand in these strange events...

Eventually, Amy and Bazett found their way to the center of the Special Zone. And in that center was a giant mass of transparent rocks, like glass, only harder. Within that floating pile was a jewel, glowing an alluring purple light. Even from that distance, Bazett could sense an unbelievable power.

"Amy!" Bazett yelled, hopping from one wall to another. She pointed at the jewel. "Is that the Chaos Emerald?"

"Yes!" Amy called back. The platform she was on tilted, but rather than jump, Amy dropped down and landed on the giant rock pile.

Bazett didn't realize that the pink hedgehog had gotten over it. "We need to break through this stuff and get the Emerald!"

Easier said than done. As did everything else in the Special Zone, the Chaos Emerald's hiding place spun erratically. It was almost impossible to continually chip away at a given point for long- The Zone would rotate everything so that one of the ladies would fall away, and be forced to jump back on. Compounding on the problem was that those red spots Amy had mentioned earlier seemed to be in large amounts around the Chaos Emerald. Bazett nearly fell one onto more than once. The fourth time, she had to split her legs to catch herself against parallel walls, and wait until the Special Zone rotated the red spots away from her. Falling once more towards the crystalline container, Bazett happened onto an idea. She smashed her fist into the rock, but didn't make a very large hole. Then, after switching arms, she hung onto that hole while using her good fist to continue pounding away at the rest of the crystals. As the Special Zone spun around, Bazett clung onto the rocks so as not to lose her place.

Amy saw what Bazett was doing, and nodded, impressed. "Good idea, Bazett! You're almost there!"

That gave Bazett an idea. "Amy! Try get on the other side of this rock, across from where I am!"

Though a bit confused, Amy nodded and began to jump around. As she did, Bazett began to strengthen her preferred arm. While a part of her was concerned that doing this would shatter the Emerald, the part that was *really* fed up with the Special Zone had a much stronger voice.

With a mighty cry, Bazett slammed her fist against the crystals. The sheer force of her punch traveled through the stones, shattering them. It soon reached the Chaos Emerald, and began to push it, until it crashed right through the other side. The Emerald flew out into the air. Amy yelled, "I got it!" and dove at the falling jewel. Time itself seemed to slow down as the paths of Chaos Emerald and Amy Rose

appeared to intersect. And when the purple jewel reached her hands, Amy blinked...

And it was *gone*.

"What?!" Amy cried, falling. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw something black, but before she could get a better look, her tumbling body hit a red spot...

Amy and Bazett were back on the street. Amy was on her knees, staring at her hands. Bazett stood over her, trying to comprehend what had happened.

"I...I don't get it," Amy said, confused. "It was right in front of me. Where..."

There came a thud. The girls looked. They looked up. Standing at the top of street light was a young man...or something that appeared to be. It looked like a young man with dark, grey skin covered in tribal tattoos. But something in Bazett's bones told her that looks were deceiving. And in this case, they weren't doing a very good job. The sheer force of its dark, unnatural presence hit Bazett's senses like a bullet train.

"So, this is a Chaos Emerald," Avenger said, holding up the gem. His eyes seemed to absorb its light. "Bit smaller than I expected..."

"Hey!" Amy yelled, running up to the street light. She pointed at Avenger. "That's our Emerald, we saw it first!"

Avenger looked down at Amy, a unsettling expression on his face. It was the kind a man would give a bug that just started talking like a human. 'Who knew such an insignificant thing could be so eloquent?' Bazett quickly activated her runes, preparing for trouble.

"...My friends and I need that Emerald to get back home," Amy continued to talk, "So, I would really appreciate it if you'd give it

back," She whipped out her hammer. "Or else!"

Avenger smirked, which was the most terrifying thing in the night. He held up the Emerald, and then...

He ate it!

Avenger's mouth stretch open, as if it was made of rubber, and he forced the Emerald in. While a cartoon character doing that would appear adorable, the sight of it in real life was nothing short of disturbing. Both Amy and the normally desensitized Bazett found themselves frozen with both shock and disgust at what Avenger was doing. They saw a very large lump appear in Avenger's neck as he swallowed, only to vanish as the jewel went down his throat.

And then something far worse happened.

Avenger's skin began to boil. It was as if his entire body was made of water, and it had been sitting on the stove long enough to reach optimal temperature. He buckled down, clearly in pain. And hundreds of kilometers away, so did a high school girl with purple hair.

" *RAAAUUGGGHHH!* " Avenger howled, and like a fish leaping out of a pond, something- three somethings- exploded from his back.

Three blobs landed on the pavement. They began take on a more detailed form, something resembling mutant, purple starfish, with a hideous large eye in the center of their backs.

"Hah...hah...hah...not bad," Avenger heaved, a look of sadistic ecstasy on his face. "No wonder the old man wanted one... With power like that, we wouldn't even need the Holy Grail!"

Amy gagged as the starfish-things stood up. "Ugh! What *are* those things?! And what the heck are *you*!?"

But Avenger didn't answer. He was staring at his creations. "One... two...three...hmm. That's all I can bring out, even with this, huh? Ah,

well..." Looking back at the ladies, he smiled evilly. "How would you girls like to play a game? It'll be loads of fun!"

"What kind of game?" Bazett asked, getting in front of Amy. She took a fighting stance, trying to prepare herself for whatever new surprise that was about to be revealed.

"It's kinda like hide-and-seek," Avenger went on, and waved at the starfish. "And you two are it! And since I'm such a nice guy, you don't have to count."

The starfish began to leap away, each going in a different direction. They made odd slurping noises as they moved. It sounded like that each motion they made was also them attempting to drink the air.

"There's no time limit," Avenger went on, "The game goes on until you find all three. Of course, my little babies might get hungry...and they *love* the taste of human flesh!"

Laughing, Avenger morphed into a shadow and slithered down the street light, before vanishing into the night.

"Hey, get back here!" Yelled Amy, giving chase.

"Forget him!" Bazett ordered, and charged at one of the starfish. "We need to destroy these things before they hurt someone!"

Moving faster than Amy had ever seen a human move, Bazett became a not-so-blue blur as she slammed her fist into the starfish. The force of the punch created a trench in the street, and when the dust cleared, the starfish was a messy pile of dark goo.

Yikes, Amy thought as she ran after another starfish, *I better make sure I don't get into an argument with her!*

Hammer raised, Amy lunged at the second starfish with intent to make an ugly pancake. She slammed her hammer down, but partially missed. Her blow only struck one of the creature's legs,

flattening it instantly. The thing writhed in pain for only a moment, before the broken limb fell off, and a new appendage grew in its place. Only this second leg looked like something that belonged to a kraken.

"Gah!" Amy shrieked, and slammed her hammer down again. She wasn't fast enough, and the abomination was able to zip away from her weapon. Amy chased after it, but the horror was faster now, and quickly zipped up the side of a building. Panicking, Amy ran up to a fire hydrant and swung her hammer. The hydrant went flying, and managed to slam into the creature, knocking off of the building. Amy charged, and once close enough brought her hammer down on the beast several times. She didn't stop until the horror was a gooey black paste.

"Yuck," Amy gagged, and scrapped her hammer against the sidewalk to wipe the gunk off. "Okay, that's two down, where's the third...?" She looked around and saw that she was the only one on the street. "Bazett?" She heard a crash in the distant. "There she is!"

The fight between Sonic and Lancer had reached a stalemate, not that either one was willing to admit it. Although Sonic was far faster and more willing to use unorthodox tactics (Like causing a fire hydrant to explode in Lancer's face), Lancer was almost as fast, had magic abilities, and a long spear. And then there was that really awkward incident when Lancer sent him flying into that apartment window...

Sonic crashed through the glass, and the second thing he heard besides the tinkling was a woman screaming. Looking up, he saw that he was now in someone's bedroom. A mature and attractive woman was desperately shaking the prone form of a young man, who simply snored off her actions.

"KOUTA!" She shrieked, "There's a tanuki in our bedroom, wake up!"

Sonic plucked a piece of glass out of his fur and scooped his Rings back up. "No, there's not. You're having a bad dream," Sonic turned towards the window before turning back. "Also, I'm a hedgehog, not a tanuki," He turned back towards the window, then glanced over his shoulder. "If you wake up and the window's still broken, just go see the priest at the local church. I think he's good for it."

Sonic was pretty sure that Shirou said something the guy at the church (What was his name, kotofin or something?) would take care of any damage caused in the War. That probably meant he could pay for broken stuff thanks to a budget he got from whatever secret organization that was in charge of that sort of thing.

Sonic bounced off of the walls, swung around street signs and lights, keeping one step ahead of Lancer and taking a shot of his own whenever a chance arose. Such openings didn't appear easily. Lancer had evidently learned from their first fight. He wasn't letting up and giving Sonic a chance to move in for another hit. This didn't mean the spearman didn't slip up and make mistakes of his own, it just meant Sonic had to be *really* observant and quick to take advantage of them. The first wasn't something he was known for, but the second came as a natural as breathing. A favorite tactic Sonic had discovered was standing against a wall, allow Lancer to charge at him, before dodging at the last minute and hitting the Servant with a Homing Shot. The precious half-second Lancer had his spear stuck in a building was plenty for Sonic to chip at the Heroic Spirit's hit points.

Weird how Masters can see a Servant's stats, Sonic thought, thinking back to what Shirou and Saber told him their first night together. He shot back to avoid Lancer's retaliation. Makes you wonder if whoever started these stupid Wars was a D&D nerd...

As Sonic prepared to run off and put a bit more distance between himself and Lancer, he stopped. This caused Lancer to stop as well, wondering if this hesitation was part of some new plan.

"What's that?" Sonic asked, pointing past Lancer.

Lancer's brain stalled, and when it reignited, he just shook his head sadly. In spite of Sonic's taunts and tricks, he had grown to respect the Hedgehog somewhat. All of that respect was now gone.

"Are you really going to try *that* gag?" Lancer asked, his tone dripping with disappointment. "I mean, that was old even during my human years. I-"

That was as far as Lancer got before a horrible, starfish-thing-with tentacles tackled him and latched onto his face. The Heroic Spirit fell to the ground, rolling and writhing as he tried to pull it off.

"_

AUUUUGGGHHGETITOFFGETITOFFGETITOFFIT'SINMYMOOUU
UTH-!"

Sonic blinked. As warped and disturbing the scene before him technically was, he had actually seen far creepier things during his adventures, including but not limited to the Dark-Gaia monsters that appeared when Eggman split open his planet. In fact, the *Aliens* shout-out taking place didn't even make the top-ten. The idea that whatever was attacking Lancer came from another Servant came to mind, so Sonic decided to invoke a tactical retreat.

"Y'know what, you're probably busy right now," Sonic said cheerfully, and began to walk off. "Let's finish this some other time."

Sonic zipped off. Three seconds later, he came back, and took a picture of Lancer's pain with the cell phone. And *then* he ran off. A minute later, Lancer managed to rip the abomination away from his face and throw it onto the pavement. Before it could crawl away, he stabbed the *Gae Bolg* into it several times, before stomping on it's remains for good measure. Once he was done, Lancer spat onto the ground.

"Gah, I'll be tasting that for a week!" Lancer moaned, wiping the beast's residue from his face. His eyes shot open with realization. "Dammit, he's gone!"

Lancer ran off in the direction he thought Sonic went in. It wasn't, and Sonic managed to return to the Emiya Estate in the hopes that a late-night game of *Aero the Acro-Bat* would undo the sight of a little sea monster trying to make out with Lancer. Moments passed, and the street was quiet again...except for the creature's remains, which made odd squelching sounds as it tried to reassert it's life and mobility.

Bazett soon appeared, having followed after the creature. It hadn't been easy, but the sound of someone screaming helped her find it. She was surprised to see that the last of the abominations had been wounded, and a quick usage of Magecraft ensured its death.

Amy came along shortly afterward. "Bazett, did you find it?"

"Yes," Bazett replied, gesturing towards the smoldering ashes. "What was left of it, at least."

"What do you- Whoa! What happened here?" Amy cried, having finally taken stock of her surroundings. A fire hydrant and a newsstand had been knocked over. The area looked like a small war had broken out.

"I think there were Servants battling here," Bazett answered, "I can sense traces of Magecraft."

"A Servant?" Amy looked thoughtful, "You mean, like Lancer?"

"It could have been Lancer...or it could have been any other Servant," Bazett muttered, "In any case, I think the creature that person conjured up is similar to a Servant."

"Huh?"

"A Servant can only exist in the world due to the Mana they receive from their Master," Bazett explained, "The same principal exists for other types of summons. I believe that creature came here to find a source of Mana to sustain itself."

"You mean it was going to eat someone? Gross!" Amy shuddered at the thought, then looked thoughtful. "Hold on, was that creepy Emerald thief...was *he* a Servant?"

"Possibly..." What Bazett didn't say was that the man who took the purple gem and conjured had a fouler Mana than the one she felt when she summoned Lancer. Servants summoned by the Grail came from the Throne of Heroes; how could a being with such a terrible presence end up there? And from what part of history did his legend spring forth?

Strange animal spirits from another world. A madman with an army of destructive robots. Servants appearing in public. And now this. By that point, all Bazett could ask was, "What next?"

High up on a tall building, Avenger looked down on the city of Fuyuki. He saw it all. The Servant Rider, stalking victims, but taking care not to be seen. The Servant Lancer, fruitlessly searching for his Hedgehog nemesis. The Servant Saber, accompanying her own Master back to their abode, where the blue Hedgehog waited. And among them, thousands of normal people, only vaguely aware of the danger they were all in.

In another timeline, they would have all been targets, potential victims to be consumed. But not here. Not now.

He felt the Chaos Emerald inside his body, it's power seeping into every atom of his being. It wouldn't be long. A few days, a week, perhaps? And then, he would have what he needed.

And his wish would be granted.

TO BE CONTINUED

Tiger Dojo

Taiga: You asked for it! You wanted it! You deserve it! It's the Tiger Dojo! I am your instructor, Fujimura Taiga!

Illya: And the Number One Student, Illya, is here as well!

Taiga: The first of the seven Chaos Emeralds has been found! Unfortunately, it's now in the hands of that lunatic, Avenger.

Illya: You'd think an Enforcer for the Mage's Association would have better luck securing a powerful artifact, wouldn't you? What a disappointment?

Taiga: But there is plenty of time for her to redeem herself. After all, they don't let weak-willed people into that Association.

Illya: They let Rin's ancestors, didn't they?

Taiga: Don't be mean! Anyway, we've got a Q/A to start! Read the first question!

Illya: Tang-Chan asks, "Where are the Chaos Emeralds?" Hey, I thought we said no more spoiler-y questions!

Taiga: We're not going to change that policy, no matter how cute your name is! However, I will keep track of the Emerald locations we have confirmed so far;

The yellow Chaos Emerald is underneath Shirou's shed. Nobody's claimed it yet.

The purple Chaos Emerald is now *inside* of Avenger. Yuck!

Illya: Speaking of Avenger, we have a question about him from Chuckie, "How did Avenger summon those starfish things? That's not a power he had in the original visual novel". Oh, Chuck, you dumb, dumb, guy.

Taiga: The Avenger we're seeing now is actually the Shadow from the *Heaven's Feel* route, with *Hollow Ataraxia* 's personality. In the

Heaven's Feel , that Shadow could recreate evil versions of the Servants it absorbed throughout that route. The creatures Avenger created in this story are actually by-products of something that was already absorbed by its previous form...but that's a story for another day. One last question!

Illya: "Due to Shirou absorbing some of the yellow chaos emerald's power, have his magic circuits been upgraded, healed, powered up, ect? Signed, Anomynous." Finally, a non-stupid question. When *Onii-chan* used Projection near the Emerald, he did take in some of its power. But I wouldn't say that he's been powered up, or anything. Because of his lousy skills, *Onii-chan* 's have actually gotten worse! Of course, that might change once Rin gives him a proper lesson in Magecraft. Though, if he wanted to learn from an *expert* , he'd ditch her and come to me.

Taiga: Also, a special announcement! The author has created an opening sequence for this story! It's posted on Youtube, under the title *Fate/Genesis OP (Fanmade)*! Be sure to check it out!

Illya: The sound isn't very good, but if you can do better, give it a try!

Taiga: Until then, we will see you at the next practice!

Winter Trees in the Distant View

Chapter 6: *Winter Trees in the Distant View*

Illyaseviel von Einsern stood before us. With a lady-like grace she never showed before, and without a trace of irony, she bowed. She took the edges of her dress and curtsied, speaking in a very refined tone.

"Thank you very much, Shirou," She said, "For granting your protection to me, who was your enemy. I sincerely appreciate it."

Rin, Saber, and I stared at Illya, trying to match up this polite young lady to the tiny psychopath we were fighting before. It was only yesterday that the white-haired child was chortling over our inevitable and entirely messy deaths.

I knew that Rin didn't really like it. And that Saber, while she had said nothing and appeared neutral, was of a similar mind. But I knew that nothing they would say would make me change my mind.

"Yeah, no problem. Since Illya is not a Master anymore," I said, "Kiritsugu would have wanted it this way." I found myself thinking of the man who once saved me. And I think I can imagine his happiness at having rescued me. As Illya relaxed, I continued, this time to Rin and Saber. "Besides, Illya is not a bad person. And...I can't just abandon a child."

Illya's eyes brightened. She began to laugh. And then, she threw herself at me. I was unprepared for this sudden assault, and couldn't stop her from wrapping her arms around my body.

"Shirou is truly my Onii-chan! " She squealed, burying her head into my chest.

And then Rin woke up. She rubbed her forehead in thought. That dream had been too realistic. But why did she have it? Was it a

warning her subconscious was trying to send her way? A glimpse of the future, perhaps. It certainly seemed that way. Even though none of the Tohsakas had shown any degree of precognitive ability, stranger things were happening now, ever since Sonic and his friends came to town. Or perhaps more likely, that little brat Illya was trying to weaken Rin with a psychic assault. She would have to redo the Boundary Field surrounding the mansion, if that was the case.

After all, even a careless pushover like Emiya wouldn't be dumb enough to invite Illya into his house.

She lurched downstairs and into the kitchen, where Archer was already making breakfast. At least there was one thing she could depend on in this screwy War. After drinking some milk directly from the carton, Rin noticed that Tails was seated at the table, fiddling with that damned Miles Electric.

"Good morning, Rin." Tails greeted, a bit hesitantly. While Archer had assured him that it was a normal thing, the sight of Rin's imitation of the walking dead still left him a bit uncertain. He hoped he would get used to it.

Sighing, Rin composed herself and replied, "Good morning, Tails." Even though she hated what their presence has turned the Holy War into, Rin still had a duty to present herself as a proper Mage. Besides, if she let on how much they annoyed her, Sonic and Tails would probably cause even more shenanigans. Well, Sonic would. Tails, she had to admit, was a fluffy little gentleman.

Archer placed a dish before her. "For the lady, breakfast."

Archer, on the other hand, was not. Dependable he was, chivalrous he wasn't. If he was acting like a French waiter, something was up. Before she could interrogate her Servant properly, Tails spoke up again.

"You're up a little early, aren't you, Rin?" the fox asked, "I mean, school's closed, isn't it? I'd thought you'd sleep in a little."

"I can't," Rin said, "I need to see that Fake Priest and have him call the ceasefire so we can focus on Eggman. And I have a few other errands to run. If I'm going to win this War, I need to make every minute count."

"Oh. That makes sense," Tails conceded, then blinked thoughtfully. "Um, don't you mean, 'if *we're* going to win'?"

"Of course, how foolish of me." Rin sighed, rubbing her forehead. She was tempted to explain the fact that only one Master could claim the Holy Grail, and that her alliance with Shirou was just a matter of convenience, but thought better of it. She didn't want to get into a lecture now. She would need all of her strength just talking to Kotomine.

Tails seemed to accept this answer, for he changed subjects. "Well, I've got some good news; The *Tornado* is all fixed! I did a systems check earlier and it all clears."

"Everything's done?" Archer asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yup! I hooked it up to some solar panels this morning." Tails answered.

"Solar panels?" It was Rin's turn to ask questions. Although still a bit resentful of how cooler his machines were compared to her Magecraft, Rin was starting to develop a curiosity about them. Helping Shirou improve his own lackluster abilities helped take the edge off.

"The *Tornado* 's got a hybrid engine," Tails explained, "Whenever we're not flying it, we just hook them up to some panels for a few hours. It's both cheap *and* pro-Earth. Gotta go green!"

Rin was actually impressed. She was a bit afraid Tails would turn out to be a miniature mad scientist in his own right, mindlessly unleashing crazy machines without a care for what kind of damage

they would do to the environment. The little fox was more caring than she had figured.

"I've been charging them every day since I landed here, and it should be finished by the time you get back." Tails finished.

"So, what do you plan on doing until we get back?" Rin asked, finishing her meal.

Tails scratched the back of his head. "I think I'm going to take it easy for today. The last two days have been pretty nuts, and I need some down time. You won't mind if I just laze around here, right?"

"Just don't leave the house," Rin told him, getting up. "I'm not expecting company, but be on the alert. The less anyone sees of you, the better."

"Okay, got it," Tails said, waving. "Have fun!"

Fun, yeah, Rin thought as Archer did the dishes. I have to talk the Fake Priest into doing the smart thing while preparing myself for a war against a maniac with an army of robots.

Soon, both Master and Servant were gone, leaving Tails alone. Tails decided he wanted to relax outside, and so went to the mansion library for some reading material. The shelves of books were meticulously ordered, with books on Magecraft kept separate from the regular fiction. Tails had already been forewarned by Archer to stay away, so he began to look over the mundane tales in hopes of finding one to his liking. At the bottom shelf, he noticed that at the far end of a case was an unmarked smaller book, covered in a decent amount of dust. Taking it and cleaning it off, he read the one word on the cover.

Sakura

Sonic woke up in the late morning. Annoyingly, the image of that... starfish latching onto Lancer's face didn't leave his thoughts as he slept. Probably because he had no idea what the thing was. A fragment of another Master of Servant's power, maybe? In any case, Sonic needed to get his mind off of the creature, and quick.

Maybe Shirou or Saber could help with that. Sonic thought, and headed towards the dining area.

The room was empty, and Sonic's first thought was that Shirou had gone to school, with Saber following. This was disregarded when he recalled how the high school had been closed due to the damage caused by Eggman's robots. Sonic briefly checked the kitchen for a note, but his search was distracted the muffled sound of a body falling. Sonic zipped outside and towards the training hall. There, he found Shirou, sprawled out on the ground with Saber standing over him. She held a kendo stick in her hands.

"When in battle, the question you need to ask yourself is, 'Is the opening real? Or is it a bluff?'" She was saying to her Master.

Shirou groaned, pulling himself up. "R-right," He saw Sonic standing at the entrance and waved shakily. "Good morning, Sonic."

"Yo." Sonic waved back, somewhat confused. Still, it didn't look like either of them were in danger or having a falling out.

Shirou resumed a fighting stance, and he and Saber began to fight again. Three seconds later he was down, minus one kendo sword and plus one bruise. In a second Shirou got up...which lasted another four seconds. At this point, Sonic became both bored and confused.

"Okay, time out!" Sonic yelled, making a T-shape with his hands. The action stopped just as Saber was about to move her sword upside Shirou's noggin. "Sorry to interrupt, but I gotta ask... Aren't Servants supposed to make sure their Masters *don't* get hurt?"

Saber's expression was neutral. "This activity was my Master's command."

"Huh?"

Rubbing his sore spots, Shirou said, "When Eggman's robots attacked the school, I...I was completely worthless. I could barely do anything to help out. You and Saber fought with your lives, and I was stuck on the sidelines. I couldn't even beat a single robot, and Tails had to save me and my underclassman."

"Hey, don't feel bad," Sonic said, going over to pat Shirou's leg. "Tails has been fighting robots way longer than you have. You'll get better. Just gotta keep trying."

Shirou found himself smiling a bit. "I know. Last night, Rin gave me some pointers on Magecraft," He bent down and picked something up. It was the newspaper Sonic brought in on his first night in Fuyuki. He closed his eyes.

" *Trace On.* " The heat returned, but it was far less painful that time. As he felt the energy flow, words appeared in his mind.

I _ am _ _ o _ my sword

Shirou held the paper out to Sonic. "Here, try bending it now."

Sonic pinched the paper's end, but to his surprise the object wouldn't budge. "Whoa, that's solid."

"Last night, Rin gave me a...let's call it medicine," Shirou tried not to think about the pain swallowing that gem Rin gave him caused. "It allowed me to form some proper Mage Circuits- that's what a Mage uses to flow their energy into spells- so now my ability to do Magecraft has gone up."

Sonic nodded with some understanding. "Okay, that's kinda nice... still doesn't explain why you're letting Saber kick you around the

curb."

"It is battle training," Saber explained, "Shirou asked of me to help him improve his swordsmanship. We do not have the luxury of time for formal instruction, so I am trying to instill proper experience into him."

"Learn by doing... I get that," Sonic considered, "But, what if you hurt so much that he can't fight at all? From where I stand, you were really whaling on him."

"That may be true," Saber considered, "And we have not had our morning meal. Perhaps we should stop..."

"Actually, I'm feeling better now," Shirou put in, "Let's go a few more rounds before having breakfast."

Saber's eyes narrowed. "So, you will not cook until you are satisfied?"

Shirou felt a twinge of fear. "Y-yeah. Is that a problem?"

FIVE MINUTES LATER

Shirou went down via Saber's wooden sword. Off to the side, Sonic traced an imaginary line into the wall.

"Annnd that's another win for the Blond Knight," The Hedgehog announced, "What's that make, a hundred in a row?"

"One hundred and four," Saber corrected, "Shirou, I believe we have trained enough. Let us eat."

Shirou could not make a valid response. His eyes and head were too busy spinning. "..."

Sonic walked over to Shirou bent down, and poked his cheek. Looking up at Saber, he said, "I think the head chef's brain is out to lunch."

Saber began to sweat, and had the decency to look awkward. "Oh, dear."

"Eh, we should let the guy rest. I bet he works too hard as it is," Sonic shrugged, and walked towards the door. "I'll make breakfast today, how about it?"

"What?" Before Saber could ask properly if Sonic could truly cook, the Hedgehog was gone in a blue blur. She heard sounds of high-speed movement coming from outside the training hall, but was reluctant to go out and watch. She looked down at Shirou's prone form.

The smell of food cooking pulled Shirou from the darkness that was unconsciousness. Actually, it wasn't that dark. He recalled a dream about a youth approaching a sword impaling a large rock...

That was when Shirou realized where he was. Saber had take a seat on her knees, and had place his head on her lap.

"Are you feeling better, Shirou?" Saber asked, looking concerned. "I did not mean to hurt you badly."

"No, it's okay," Shirou replied, his cheeks heating up from their close proximity. He sat up so Saber wouldn't notice. "What's that smell?"

"Sonic insisted on cooking a meal for us," Saber explained, "I...don't know what he's doing exactly."

Leaving the training hall, Master and Servant saw that Sonic had assembled a fire in the middle of the yard, and was cooking a large pot of stew over the flames. Sonic was stirring the concoction with a ladle when he saw the pair.

"Hey, Shirou, how ya doing?" Sonic greeted, "Grub'll almost be done in a minute, if you don't mind waiting."

"That's not something I want to hear from the guy who rushes into everything," Shirou replied, walking over to the set-up. He looked into the pot and saw among the broth was a bunch of hastily cut up veggies and meat. "Erm, what exactly did you put in this?"

"Relax, it'll taste great," Sonic assured, purposely dodging the question. "Go grab some bowls and spoons- I left them in the kitchen."

While fetching the requested items, Shirou took stock of the Emiya household's food supplies; The result was miniscule. With not just Saber but Sonic having dinner, the fridge and cupboard was going bare at a much faster rate. All that was left were an apple, and some rice balls that he made yesterday. Shirou decided that his day off from school would be spent at the grocery store.

Still, at the very least the stew was decent enough that the normally stoic Saber smiled a bit as she ate- though not as much as she did when eating Shirou's cooking, the mage noted with some satisfaction.

"Yeah, when you're on the road a lot, you can't always count on a diner being everywhere," Sonic semi-bragged, sitting on a rock. "Gotta learn how to make do with what you've got."

"Well, you certainly did that." Shirou admitted.

"I actually prefer campfire food more than the stuff you make in kitchens, actually," Sonic remarked, "Just feels more natural."

The discussion shifted away from Sonic's culinary skills and preferences and towards something that had been creating an itch in Shirou's mind; Sonic's world. From the way Sonic described it, it sounded like a paradise. A world with futuristic cities, flying cars included. Exotic jungles and landscapes, where people with special powers didn't have to hide. A world that permitted heroes to fight for what they believed in.

Of course, it's also a world where a total maniac can go on a rampage unhindered, The more cynical part of Shirou's soul commented, before admitting, Then again, that's not much different than the way things are here...

"...Anyway, we get to where the secret treasure of Babylon is hidden, but Eggman pops out of nowhere with a gun," Sonic was saying, "He keeps us away from the big chest long enough to get a look inside, and what was there? A dusty old rug! Dude fainted right there!"

Sonic burst out laughing at the memory, and Shirou and Saber chuckled along with him.

Wiping a tear of mirth from his eye, Sonic said, "Well, that's enough about me. You two crazy kids have any adventures planned for today?"

"Besides grocery shopping?" Shirou asked, and took a moment to refill Saber's bowl. "I was thinking of going to see Shinji today. I want to talk about possibly working with him and Rider to fight against Eggman."

Sonic raised an eyebrow. "I dunno, man, isn't Rider the dark chick who can't keep her hands to herself?"

"I am more than a match for Rider," Saber asserted, "If she attempts to harm my Master, I will show no mercy."

Sonic pointed a 'finger-gun' at Saber. "You're scary girl, Sab', and I'm glad you're one of the good guys."

"Me too," Shirou agreed, earning a laugh from Sonic. He then asked, "I don't suppose it's too much to hope for that you'll stay indoors again?"

Sonic scratched the back of his head. "Actually, I'm planning to take a run in the countryside. I need to get out of the city for a bit to clear

my head. Y'know, shoot the breeze, and outrun the bullet. Don't worry, I'll make sure no one sees me."

"The whole country's probably seen you already, remember?" Shirou reminded, "But, it's okay. You saved the school from Eggman and those people from Lancer and Rider. You've earned a little freedom."

Shirou looked down at the pot and saw that it was already half-empty. He also saw Saber pouring another serving of stew into her bowl. She looked at him with unflinching eyes, and then added a ladle's worth to Shirou's bowl.

"Please eat up, Shirou," She said, "You need to recover your strength."

Shirou ate some more. His eyes drifted towards Sonic. Shirou noticed that Sonic hadn't touched his empty bowl for a bit, and was starting to fidget.

Shirou said, "You can leave right now, if you want, Sonic. I'll clean everything up once Saber and I are done."

"You sure?" Sonic asked, "You do a lotta cleaning as it is."

"Go," Shirou insisted, "I said it before; You've earned a day off."

"Kay" Sonic was gone in flash, leaving his dried bowl spinning in the air. Before it could fall and break, he was back, catching it. "Also, you're out of toilet paper. Later!"

And off Sonic went. Shirou couldn't even follow his movements. Only by following Saber's gaze was he able to track Sonic's path, over the far wall of the property. There was a small pang of jealousy in his heart as he was once again reminded of how far he had to go before he could be just like them- a hero.

Lancer, invisible to all and stationed several houses away, watched as Sonic darted between shadows on his way out from the neighborhood.

He's leaving. He reported to his Master, and began run after the Hedgehog.

Wait until he's in a secluded location, Kotomine ordered, *Someplace that won't have a witness you'll forget to kill.*

Lancer purposely ignored that remark. Kotomine hadn't been too happy that Lancer's scheme to bring Sonic out of hiding had not only backfired, but in his zeal to kill his animalistic nemesis he had neglected to silence the women that had seen them. Though Lancer didn't see what was the point anymore. Thanks to Sonic's and Saber's showboating on television (And he had to admit, that mask Saber had worn was pretty cool-looking), the entire country was becoming aware that something terribly unusual was happening in Fuyuki. Kotomine had spent the better part of the previous night trying to cover everything up. The priest was irritable from lack of sleep.

But Lancer didn't really care, honestly. In fact, knowing that the current situation was causing his current Master so much pain cheered Lancer up somewhat. And as infuriating Sonic could be, he was still the only opponent in the Holy War that Kotomine was allowing him to fight, which sated the Heroic Spirit's desire for battle. And deep down, he admired Sonic for fighting to defend the people of the city. It was only to enforce the rule of secrecy that Lancer had to seek the Blue Blur out...and maybe if he was lucky, he might be able to fight a giant robot of his own.

All told, this War was heading in a good direction.

Sakura was miserable. Sakura was scared. Sakura was also tired. She was sitting on a bench in the Central Park, a place that had been built in honor of the people who had died in the Fire. Sakura

shivered. Even in the sunlight, she felt cold. With her innate senses, she could tell that this area was full of grudges and other negative feelings. Not the best place to relax for a potential mage, but it distracted Sakura from her current problem. While she had managed to get some sleep thanks to Avenger's absence, that was proving to be another form of torture.

She knew that when a Master slept, instead of dreams they would see visions of their Servant's life. She had briefly seen a few pieces of Rider's before handing control over to Shinji. That life apparently had sisters who teased her. So when Avenger appeared, she began to see into his life too

And it was full of pain. Suffering. Being forced to experience hundreds of different types of tortures. It was like watching her own life, except with more fire. And every time Sakura woke up, she could swear that she had developed a few burn marks of her own. *Some* part of her body had been set on fire, she knew that for sure. She also knew that this new torment in her life had been orchestrated by her grandfather. It had to have been. Everything that had gone wrong for her was all due to Zouken's machinations.

No doubt he was enjoying every minute of it.

Matou Zouken was not happy.

Of course, Zouken had never been truly happy in several hundred years. The closest he ever got was sadistic pleasure, which got old really fast. Centuries of disappointment in both his descendants and the world as a whole had withered away at his soul until it had become as malformed as his body. But now that the Holy Grail War had begun, Zouken had a specific reason for his bitterness. And, surprisingly, it wasn't just Shinji's typical blundering that made him grind his remaining teeth.

It was the Shadow.

Zouken knew everything there was to know about the Heaven's Feel. Back when he was young, living under the name Zolgen Makiri, he journeyed from his homeland in Asia to develop the rituals that would become the Holy Grail War alongside the Einzbern and the Tohsaka clans. Back then, he had been young and idealistically foolish. He thought their methods would work the first time. That they would achieve the Holy Grail.

But time after time, failure was all their efforts resulted in. After the Fourth War, Zouken decided that a new method was needed. Normally, in each Holy War, the deaths of each Servant would empower the Grail, with the Master of the last Servant allowed to control the completed Grail's power. But it never came to pass. In each War, no Master had been able to achieve a wish. After the Fourth War, Zouken decided that a change in tactics was in order. Gathering up the essence of the Incomplete Fourth Grail, he transmuted into one of his familiars and placed it in Sakura. When active, it would become a living Shadow that would seek out the Mana of other creatures until it amassed enough energy to create the Holy Grail. He was pleased as he could be when such a creature did appear...and when it started talking, that pleasure transformed into exasperation. The Shadow was not what it should have been. It was supposed to mindlessly seek out the other Servants to absorb, as well as any other person ill-fated enough to stumble upon it. But not Avenger. Avenger was, to a degree, intelligent. Cautious. Cunning, as it turned out. This went far beyond Zouken's calculations. He had lost track of the thing just before that idiot Eggman attacked the school. Zouken hated not being in control of his resources. It had never happened. Even when a clan member *thought* they were rebelling against him, their actions were actually to his benefit...or amusement. But Avenger seemed to possess a Presence Concealment similar to the Assassin class, which should have been impossible!

It was those outsiders' fault, Zouken thought bitterly within the confines of his Manor's inner recesses. In glass jars around him, his worm-familiars squirmed at his dark thoughts. *The unusual power*

they brought with them, these...Chaos Emeralds...that's why the Shadow has become this way.

Zouken's musings were cut off at the sound of his doorbell chiming. It was odd. He rarely received visitors. The only people who bothered to come to the Matou Manor were clan members, who knew they didn't need to announce themselves. Thanks to his worms spread everywhere, Zouken knew if anyone would be at the door.

At first, Zouken considered just ignoring his visitors. But after some consideration, decided that it would be better to greet them. After all, the Master of Saber was apparently friends with that so-called Sonic the Hedgehog...perhaps he could glean some in-depth information from the foolish boy...

Shirou considered ringing the doorbell one last time. But he didn't. He and Saber were standing out on the front door of the Matou Manor, waiting for someone, anyone, to answer their summons. Besides him, Saber looked more tense and edgy than she normally was, and Shirou didn't blame her. The Matou Manor was anything but welcoming. It was a large and foreboding place, and no one visited it unless they had to. From what he had heard, Shinji himself rarely stayed at the estate himself, preferring to spend his dinners eating out and picking up girls. And it was here, at this time, that Shirou understood why Sakura always preferred to have dinner at the Emiya Estate. This place...no matter how Shirou looked at it, didn't feel like it could be a home to anyone. The entire building and surrounding property seemed more like a hole that existed suck other people in...

The door creaked open, breaking Shirou from his increasingly depressing thought patterns. Now looking at them was a small, bald man, whose entire body seemed to be wreacked with wrinkles. His eyes were squinted so tightly that Shirou couldn't make out their color. However, this shriveled creature had a presence that Master and Servant could instantly tell who it was.

Matou Zouken looked from both Shirou and Saber. "May I help you?"

Remembering his manners, Shirou bowed slightly, and Saber followed.

"Hello, my name is Emiya Shirou," Shirou greeted, and nodded at Saber. "This is Saber."

Zouken rubbed his chin thoughtfully, leaning on his cane. "Shirou...I have heard that name before, haven't I...?" He let out a sharp laugh. "Ah, now I remember! You are a friend of Shinji's aren't you?"

"Erm, yes, kind of," In truth, Shirou and Shinji hadn't exactly been on the easiest terms for several months, but there was no need to include that detail. "Anyway, is Shinji home? I need to talk to him about something."

Zouken hummed. "Unfortunately, Shinji has not been home for some time. In fact, he left yesterday."

"What? Why? And to where?" Shirou asked, blinking.

"I do not know," Zouken admitted. The night before, as Shinji was pacing the hallways, the minute he saw Zouken- Zouken's human body- his eyes widened and he bolted. The coward. "All I can say for certain is that yesterday's events have had an effect on him."

Shirou nodded. "Yeah, it was pretty insane." And suddenly, Shinji's absence meant sense. If Shinji believed the theory that Eggman had Magecraft detecting technology, then of course he would want to get away from a site of immense power. Of course, that Shinji apparently fled his home without warning his family was more than a little upsetting.

Should I tell him? Shirou thought. After all, if Eggman did attack the Matou Manor at one point, that would mean Sakura would be in danger. Perhaps if Zouken knew what Eggman was after, he would send his granddaughter to a safer place.

The real question was, how much did Zouken know about Shinji's involvement in the War? Shinji claimed to have obtained Rider by chance. If she was a normal Servant, like Archer, then Rider could hide herself by entering her astral state. He had to be careful with his words. Despite what Rin thought of him, he wasn't completely careless. He couldn't just take for granted of how much Zouken knew. He needed to avoid revealing any information that could endanger himself or Saber...or Sonic.

"I am more concerned with the well-being of my granddaughter, Sakura," Zouken went on, "Are you familiar with her?"

Shirou nodded, "Yes, she's a member of the archery club. Is she doing all right? She looked a bit tired yesterday."

Zouken shook his head slowly. "No, she is not. I fear that the stress of the recent events may be more than she can handle. The murders, these strange creature events..."

"It appears that something else is bothering Sakura," Saber spoke up, looking intently at Zouken. "Everyone is aware of the attacks. But for some reason Sakura has been more affected than others."

Zouken did not answer at first. Then he said, "Sakura has always been more vulnerable than others. However, I suspect that these events are reminding her of a traumatic event from her early childhood."

"What happened?" Shirou asked without thinking.

Now it was Zouken's turn to look intently, this time at Shirou. "A member of the clan died right in front of her."

Shirou felt himself go cold. That story sounded so familiar...

"And now, these odd events- the school attack, the creature sightings...very disturbing," Zouken sighed, "Especially that blue

thing...machines can be built, but why would something like that appear? A very unnatural anomaly."

"Sonic saved everyones lives at the school," Shirou said firmly, "If he hadn't been there, Dr. Eggman would have destroyed the school and everyone in it."

"Perhaps."

There was something in Zouken's tone that Shirou didn't like. And he knew just what it was. Kiritsugu had mentioned how dedicated heretical mages were to maintaining the secrecy they hid behind. The Mages Association would allow and more likely cause the deaths of hundreds if it would mean keeping the rest of the world from learning the existence of Magecraft. And apparently the Mage before him was the same.

Shirou made a decision. "Listen, would it be all right if Sakura stayed at my house for a few days?"

Zouken's eyebrow, or the piece of his face that once had an eyebrow, shot up. "What are you talking about? If you are trying to court her, then you are doing it wrong, and too early at that."

If Rin had said it, Shirou would have been embarrassed. But Zouken's passive disapproval of Sonic had awoken something inside of him. And so Shirou decided to bare all.

"Dr. Eggman can find Magecraft." The young Master said.

"...What?" Zouken's expression had not changed, but the tone of his voice had.

"I think Eggman's robots attacked the school because of the presence of Magecraft there," Shirou went on, "I know that the Matous are a clan of Mages. It's only a matter of time until he decides to come here. Please tell Sakura that she can rest at the

Emiya home until Eggman is captured," He bowed his head. "Thank you for your time, sir. Let's go, Saber."

Shirou turned and began to walk away. After looking at Zouken for a moment longer, Saber followed after him. As they left, the head of the Matou pondered Shirou's words. While he didn't believe Shirou's claims, they would explain why Shinji left and took Rider with him. The gutless weasel was clearly trying to avoid being at the site of another potential attack.

And as for letting Sakura stay with Emiya... Zouken felt his features twist into a terrifying smile.

"...So, you see, Kotomine, we can't continue the War until Eggman is taken care of." Rin finished.

Getting to the church had taken less time than Rin had thought. Of course, the Fake Priest had actually been doing a sermon when she arrived, and had been forced to wait until he had finished. It was odd. Not once since he had taken over the church did Rin ever come by when Kotomine was doing actual priest duties. From what she had heard, people who listened to Kotomine tended to leave in a worse state than when they came. Hearing her guardian talk, Rin could understand why; Kotomine could make even a grocery list sound like a condemnation of someone's life. And yet, even those who felt "I'm sorry I had been born" would thank "Father Kotomine" for his time. It was uncanny. The minute the scant crowd left, Rin approached Kotomine and laid down the line.

Rather than being his usual upsetting self, the Holy War overseer just nodded. "Yes, I understand. But I wonder if Eggman is the true threat," he said, spreading out his arms. "His machines were frightening, I am sure, but they were just that- machines. Wouldn't an animal spirit running amok be more concerning to Mages?"

It was the same line that Rin had used on Shirou, which only made the Master of Archer even more annoyed. She hated having her own

words thrown in her face, if only by accident. However, unlike Shirou she had a logical comeback.

"It's not that simple, and you know it," Rin said, "Eggman made it clear he's looking for something that's in the city. And he said it in public, which means the rest of Fuyuki, maybe all of Japan, knows that. The city being threatened will lead to a heightened military presence, 'for our own protection'. Even with Boundary Fields, someone's bound to notice something- and we might not be able to hypnotize them fast enough. As for that tanuki, from what I've seen-" (Rin decided that Kotomine didn't need to know how close she was to Sonic) "-he seems to have some sort of hero complex. The first sighting was when he saved one of Lancer's victims, and then he showed up at the attack. If we go after Eggman, we might find the tanuki."

After a moment, Kotomine exhaled. "Very well. I will make the announcement tonight.

"...Although I honestly doubt it will accomplish anything."

"What do you mean?" Rin asked.

"During the Fourth Holy War, the Caster team refused to follow the rules, and the officiator at the time- my father- declared that they were to be destroyed. But instead of doing so, the Masters continued to fight each other," Kotomine explained, "It was only until Caster summoned his greatest monster that a few Servants banded together to vanquish the beast. I see no reason that the current Masters, except for Emiya Shirou and yourself, will act any different."

"They will if you tell them that Eggman's machines can track Magecraft." Rin said, and was quite pleased to see how shocked Kotomine appeared at her words.

"...And how did you come to that conclusion?" Kotomine asked slowly.

"Both times Eggman sent his robots to Homurahara Academy, there were Servants present," Rin explained, "Considering how the school has no value strategically speaking, that's the only explanation as to why he went there."

"Hmm," Kotomine hummed, "Your father would have trouble accepting that."

"My father would have liked to *some* explanation as to why this maniac is attacking places that have Servants." Rin said coldly, and walked out of the church.

After leaving the Matou Manor, Shirou and Saber headed straight into the shopping district. All over, they could hear people talking about what happened yesterday. At street corner cafes, tables were filled with discussions as to what Sonic was. Some were talking about how awwwwwesome those robots looked, even if they wrecked the school and endangered countless lives. There were mutterings on the street over whether or not the high school had some secret treasure. Those who talked about the 'Bug Queen' (A monicker that irritated Saber) concluded that she must have been an overeager *sentai* cosplayed.

Along the way, Shirou saw a police car parked in front of a pet store. The area had been cordoned off, and two officers were investigating the scene.

"...The animals are gone, but none of the products or money was taken," One policeman reported, "What do you think?"

The older-looking cop just rubbed the back of his head. "I'm starting to think this town is cursed, or something. First it was those weird squid-things ten years ago..."

That intrigued Shirou. Ten years ago was when the Fourth Holy Grail War happened. While he now knew that the Great Fire was caused by the War, the policeman's words made him wonder whatever else

happened. And just how close the rest of the world was to discovering Magecraft...

"Shirou." Saber spoke up. She sounded tense.

Shirou was pulled out of his thoughts. He and Saber were at a crosswalk. Just as the signal changed to DON'T WALK, he saw a small figure with white hair on the other side of the street. He couldn't get a good look, however, as the passing cars blocked his view. In a minute, the signal became WALK, but once the crosswalk was clear, the mysterious being across the road was gone.

"Hello, *Onii-chan!* " A happy voice chirped from his other side.

Shirou and Saber looked down and saw none other than Illya looking up at them, beaming happily. In flash, Saber was in between the two Masters. The Servant glared down at the shorter, as if daring her to make a move.

Illya cocked her head. "Why so angry, Saber? I'm not here to start a fight."

"You're not?" Shirou asked, looking over Saber's shoulder. It was easy, given how much shorter Saber was compared to him.

"Mm-mm!" Illya giggled, shaking her head. "We're not supposed to fight the War in public. After all, acting in front of everyone would be..." She held up a newspaper clipping. It was a picture of Sonic and the masked Saber, jumping around Eggman and Frankly. "... *stupid.* "

Subtle. Shirou thought. He didn't have to see Saber's face to know that it was becoming flushed. The real question was, was Saber upset at having been called out for appearing in public, and on television at that? Or did she regret wearing such a silly mask while doing it?

Still, it was a good thing that they had met Illya at the moment. Maybe now they could get another ally to fight Eggman.

"Illya, can we talk?" Shirou asked, stepping around Saber to better face his pint-sized enemy.

Illya blinked. "About what?"

Shirou looked around. Illya may have been teasing Saber, but she had a point; a public area wasn't the best place to conduct business about the War. They needed a more secluded location. Across the street he saw a parking garage.

"Let's go over there, first." He said, pointing.

Illya and Saber exchanged looks. A few minutes later, the three of them were in the garage. There were only a few cars. Shirou took Illya to an area with no cars.

"Ooh, *Onii-chan* , you naughty boy," Illya giggled, "Bringing a sweet young thing to a dark place...what are you thinking?"

Saber grimaced, clearly annoyed at Illya. Shirou just sighed. He was so glad no one was around to hear that.

"Illya, do you know why Dr. Eggman attacked my school, yesterday?" Shirou asked.

Looking more serious, Illya replied, "He was looking for some kind of jewel, right?"

"And he was willing to destroy the entire place for it," Shirou said. He decided not to elaborate exactly *why* Eggman wanted the jewel so badly. "Saber and Sonic beat him that time, but he got away. And we couldn't find anything in the school, so it's only a matter of time before he attacks again. We need to stop him before he wrecks the city."

Illya shrugged. "And why should I care? After all, that has nothing to do with the Holy Grail."

"Not yet," Saber interjected. She now understood why Shirou wanted to talk with Illya privately. "However, if he continues to invade Fuyuki, the authorities will be forced to take closer investigation of suspicious events. The whole of Magecraft may be exposed."

"So, why are you talking about this with me?" Illya asked, "You're in an alliance with Rin, aren't you?"

"We are," Shirou affirmed, "And, I was wondering if you'd like to join it."

Illya's eyes widened, then narrowed. She turned away.

"I know we're supposed to be enemies in the Grail War," Shirou continued, "But the only reason I'm taking part is to help protect my home from Masters and Servants who are hurting other people. *They* are my enemies," He got down on one knee so as to better face the back of Illya's head. "I don't want to be yours, though. And right now, Eggman is a worse threat than anyone in the War. We need all the help we can get. We need you."

Illya didn't say anything. She shook slightly. After a moment, she wiped her face on the sleeve of her coat. The white-haired Master turned back to look at Shirou.

"Prove it."

Shirou blinked. "Prove it?"

"If you want me as an ally, then do something to prove it," Illya declared, sticking her nose up. "If you treat me well, I *may* take your request under serious consideration."

Shirou stood up and scratched the back of his head thoughtfully. While happy to not be rejected outright, his recruitment had hit a

roadblock- What could he do for someone like Illya? From what he had discussed with Rin, the Einzberns were immensely well off; Even the most expensive thing Shirou could buy would probably be nothing more than poor men's substitutes for things Illya probably already had.

This led Shirou to realize that he didn't know anything about Illya beyond her being a Master. The most he had was that she had some strange fascination with him. He found himself visualizing what kind of life Illya had growing up; Judging from her total lack of concern for human lives, it must have been a very isolated existence; no contact with real people, or maybe any people- just learning Magecraft, and nothing else. Shirou thought about Rin, growing up alone in her giant mansion, and suddenly his heart went out to Illya. More than gaining an ally for the fight against Eggman, Shirou realized what he wanted was to give Illya a chance to be a normal girl. With that in mind, what he had to do was obvious.

FIVE MINUTES LATER

"I'd like three tickets to the *Kamen Rider* movie," Shirou told the woman running the box office, "One child, one high school student, and one adult."

"That'll be 34000 yen, please!"

Shirou grimaced as he went for his wallet. He hoped neither girl wanted snacks. Behind him, he could hear Illya looking back and forth between the movie poster and his Servant.

Sonic the hedgehog looked out at the landscape from atop of a hill. Before him, forest and mountain stretched out as far as the eye can see.

And not a single loop-de-loop in sight.

In spite of that, Sonic loved it. The clean, fresh air breezing through his quills. The sound of the tree branches rustling in the wind. The approaching guy with the red spear...

Sonic let out an annoyed groan as Lancer reached the foot of the hill. "Not you again! What, are FOLLOWING me around?"

"Had to, spiny," Lancer replied, "My Master's not too happy with the way you've been acting."

Sonic raised an eyebrow. "Way I've been acting? What have I- Wait," Sonic closed his eyes and began to trace circles on his forehead. "I'm getting a psychic vision. My latent telepathic powers are telling me...that...this...haaaas something to do with my epic television debut?"

Lancer rolled his eyes. "What, you can read minds now?"

"It's called 'pattern recognition'," Sonic replied, "It's funny how the guy who saved a school is getting all kinds of grief. Where's the respect? I mean, Saber was fighting Eggman, too, and nobody's mad at her!"

"Yeah, she did look pretty cute in that helmet," Lancer admitted, "But she didn't do anything really outrageous. Not like you, though. Just going out in public is a sure sign of Magecraft existing, and that's something my Master can't allow."

"And what about you?" Sonic asked, with one eyebrow raised.

Lancer shrugged. "I dunno. I know what the rules should be, but I'm impressed with what happened; taking down a giant robot with your bare hands isn't something any normal guy can do. But as a Servant, I've got an obligation to follow my Master's orders- And he wants you to stop. Sorry to say, but in the long run, you're a bigger threat to the world order than some nut job with fancy toys."

"That right?" Sonic sighed, rocking back and forth on his heels. "Man, out of all the worlds I've been to, this is definitely the most messed up."

"All the worlds?" Lancer repeated, blinking. "What, you're from another dimension, or something?" In the back of his mind, he could feel his Master inhaling. It was a bold claim, but if it was true...

Sonic shrugged. "I'll tell you all about it...if you can keep up."

And with those words, Sonic fell back. Curling up into a ball, he began to roll down the hill, going faster and faster. It was something that all hedgehogs could do, and a pastime Sonic hoped he would never outgrow. In three seconds he reached the foot of the hill, and easily bounced onto his feet and zipping off.

"Hey! Get back here!" Lancer yelled, running after Sonic.

As Sonic tore into the woods, he weighed his options. While it irked him that he was getting the business for his actions- his *undeniably heroic* actions- from his enemies as well as allies, Lancer coming after him was secretly a blessing. If the blue-clad Servant was chasing after *him*, then he wasn't hunting and hurting innocent people. That said, if Lancer had the chops to keep coming after him, it meant he had to have killed who-knew-how-many people in order to build up his strength. That didn't sit well. This had to stop.

Maybe I should call for back-up, Sonic thought as he darted into a forest. While he figured he could take Lancer on his own, it wouldn't have hurt to have a little extra help. Plus, Saber continually insisted that he not fight other Servants, leaving that to her and Archer.

On the other hand, it was plainly clear that Lancer's Master wasn't letting him fight other Servants. If he called in one of his Servant friends, that Master would just pull Lancer out with a Command Seal. In any case, at the speed they were going they would be in another country by nightfall. The two of them were so far from the city that Sonic was already considering just checking into a hotel when he

heard Lancer yelling from behind. He wasn't sure, but it sounded like, "Come back and fight, you coward!"

It was hard to hear things when you were running at 200 miles an hour.

Sonic then saw something flash by that made him grin. Leaping up, he ricocheted off of a tree and grabbed the object before heaving it at Lancer. It didn't hit- among the powers granted to him as a Servant in the Heaven's Feel was Protection From Arrows; No matter what was thrown at Lancer, the spear-weilder would instinctively avoid or block it. Because he saw it coming, Lancer instantly spun his spear to deflect it.

He only learned that it was a hornet's nest until after the fact. Amid the buzzing and stinging, he distinctly heard the tell-tale sound of a camera going "click".

" I HATE THAT HEDGEHOG! "

Not too far from the main city of Fuyuki, a castle sat. It was owned and maintained by the Einzberns so their Master could have a base of operations for the Holy Grail War. Currently, it's only occupants were two maids, Sella and Leysritt.

Leysritt was folding the laundry when she suddenly looked up.

Sella glanced away from her mopping. "What is it?"

"Do you hear something?"

"I'm home!" Rin announced as she entered her mansion. Her mode was distinctly neutral; while talking to kotomine had sent her attitude into the negative zone, on her way back had managed to get a few decent gems at a reasonable price. Money was tight for the one-member Tohsakah clan; while her father used to own numerous

properties, after his death they all fell into the Fake Priest's hands. In the years that followed, Kotomine sold most of those properties off, claiming that excessive wealth would be a bad influence. For many years, Rin really wanted to punch his lights out.

Maybe Tails could build an gadget you could a make a fortune marketing. Archer had suggested half-jokingly, which Rin had pointedly ignored. While her pride as Mage had been wounded, there was no denying that Sonic and Tails had already provided invaluable help for the Holy Grail War. She couldn't pester the little fox with requests after all of that.

The mansion was quiet. A bit too quiet for Rin's liking. Strange how quickly she had gotten used to the sound of Tails' tinkering.

The mystery was solved when she entered the living room. Lying on the couch, with his namesake appendages wrapped around himself like a blanket, Tails dozed. He looked so vulnerable that Rin then realized that for all intents and purposes Tails was a child, far away from. As aggravating as their presence had been, the situation must be even harder on the outsiders. Rin was so transfixed on the fox's sleeping form that she didn't notice the strange thing on the coffee table until it beeped.

It was a toy of some sort, Rin could tell that much. It was blue, both light and dark, with big yellow eyes. It's body was a sphere, it's arms and feet were like stubs, and atop its tear-shaped head was a yellow propeller.

The propeller began to spin as an electronic but childlike voice emitted from the toy.

"Rin has entered the room! Please wake up!" The toy announced, hovering into the air.

Rin shrieked and punched the thing across the room with a Reinforced fist. It hit the wall with a 'thunk', falling down to the floor afterwards.

"Ow! What was that for?" The object complained.

Tails opened his eyes and unwrapped himself. Sitting up, he yawned and waved to Rin.

"Oh, hey, Rin!" Tails greeted, "What's up? When'd you get back?" When he realized that Rin was in a fighting stance, his ears twitched. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

Archer materialized. "I think you need to introduce us to your new alarm clock." he said, pointing to where the thing was.

"Oh, that? That's an Omochao," Tails explained, getting up. He took a moment to stretch. "Omochaos are basically combination toy-slash-PDAs; You can use them to store information to be played back, act as alarm clocks, and other minor digital tools."

"So, that's *not* some new weapon from Eggman that snuck into the house," Archer stated, "Just another advanced device from your world."

Tails shrugged. "Actually, Omochaos are kinda obsolete nowadays. I only keep one around because they bug Sonic."

Rin took the time to calm down. She couldn't keep allowing herself to get worked up by all of these new surprises. She had to resume her place as a dignified Mage and elegant lady, like her father wanted her to be. Exhaling, Rin pointedly ignored the sound of the Omochao approaching to face Tails.

"Tails, do you have any *other* fancy machines I should know about?" She asked, unable to keep herself from watching as Omochao hovered up to Archer's eyes.

Tails shook his head. "Nope, just my tools, the Extreme Gear, Omochao, and my Miles Electric. So, how'd it go at the church? Did that Koto-guy agree to call a ceasefire?"

"He did, but I don't think we can count on any of the other Masters helping out. Also, I think he's going to declare open season on you and Sonic as well."

"What?! What did we do?" Tails paused, "Wait, is this about us being seen?"

Rin nodded, and joined him on the couch. "Look, I understand that you and Sonic mean well, but well-meaning people don't make the rules. Typically, Mages care more about keeping their secrets than innocent lives," She reached down and gave Tails a friendly scratch behind the ears. "You're just going to have to be more careful, from now on."

Tails sighed, and squirmed a little. Rin wasn't sure he was enjoying the scratching or not. She then realized that maybe she was being a little insensitive, and stopped. The minute she did, Archer came in served some tea. It was quite good.

"We should be thankful that the Mage's Association hasn't stepped in as it is," Archer said, "It's possible that all of this robot craziness is throwing off their watchers, but we can't rely on that forever."

"Well, I've got some good news, at least," Tails said, checking his watch. "The *Tornado* 's done refueling. We can take her out for a spin and do an air search!"

"'We'?" Rin repeated, not liking where the conversation was going. "What do you mean, 'We'?"

"You, me, and Archer!" Tails hopped off of the couch. "It'll be great. Even if we don't find anything, it'll be a great way to pass time. The fresh air, the wild blue yonder- whaddya say?"

Rin pinched the bridge of her nose. "Look, you've been a lot of help, and I am grateful for what you've done, but if you think I'm going to get in that heap, you've got another thing coming."

FIVE MINUTES LATER

"I hate you," Rin muttered in the secondary seat behind Tails. "I hate you both." *Foxes should not have puppy-dog eyes!*

Tails cheerfully ignored her as he did a pre-flight check. "Okay, fuel, check. Flaps, check. Tail, check. Landing gear, check...Hey, where's Archer?" He looked around. "I haven't seen him since he helped you buckle your seatbelt.

"Archer's going to follow us in spirit form," Rin replied, curled up as tight a ball. "He's afraid that if he doesn't his weight might overwork the engine."

"Oh, that's kind of him," Tails remarked, and went back to his checks. "Okay, that's about everything that counts. We're good to launch! Prepare for takeoff!"

The bi-plane's propeller began to spin. The *Tornado* began to move forward. Rin just then realized that the yard wasn't nearly half the size of an appropriate runway. Before she could voice these concerns, the bi-plane shot forward, sending the teenaged Mage into the back of her seat.

"Annnnd we have liftoff!" Tails cheered, and looked back. "How're ya holding up, Rin?"

"I...I thought we were going to hit the hedges!" Rin squeaked, overcome with both shock and excitement. Her very being was a flurry of emotions and adrenaline.

"The *Tornado* 's built to for easy takeoffs," Tails explained, "The faster you get airborne, the better, right?"

As they flew higher and higher up, Rin's soul became the center for a cacophony of feelings. While her "inner Mage" kept telling her not to be impressed, it was only an airplane, people fly in airplanes all the time, she just couldn't keep the thrill buried. This was far different

from being in a commercial airline. She could feel the wind rushing past her face, blowing her pigtails this way and that. Her heart was beating so hard and fast that there was no comparison to the sensation of summoning Archer.

As the *Tornado* continued, the initial thrill was replaced by a certain awe. They were so high up, higher than any building in Fuyuki. And soon they were outside of the city entirely. The beauty of Japan lay out before- *beneath* them. It was breathtaking.

Then an obnoxious beeping could be heard.

"Hmm, I'm picking up an energy signature," Tails reported, "It's a pretty big one. Since we're out of the city, it might be a Chaos Emerald!"

Rin's eyes widened, then narrowed. Casting out her senses as far as she could, she tried to sense anything that Tails' gadget had detected. While she could pick up on *something*, it felt distant, but familiar.

Archer, can you sense anything? She asked her Servant through their mind link.

Yes, but I don't think it's an Emerald, Archer replied, *Look down.*

Rin did so, just as Tails cried out, "Wow, check that place out!"

It was a castle, built in the middle of the woods. Even from their altitude, the sheer elegance and mystery of it all could be felt. Aged, but pristine, the structure looked like something out of a fairy tale.

"The Einzbern Castle..." Rin muttered, frowning. *Of course it is, why shouldn't anything go our way now?*

Tails took another look at the Mile Electric, plugged into his control panel. "The energy is coming from that castle. Wanna land someplace to investigate?"

"No, don't bother," Rin said, "That castle belongs to another Master-Illia. Your radar is getting confused by the Boundary Field around it."

"Illia? You, you mean that little psycho girl with the pet monster on steroids?" Tails gulped. He tried to sound hopeful. "Uh, maybe she's not home?"

"Maybe, or maybe she's sleeping in," Rin said, "Archer's pretty good, but how confident in your ability to confront something like Berserker again?" She heard about Sonic and Tails' encounter with the behemoth from Archer, who was told by Tails. She watched Tails shiver and felt a small sense of satisfaction.

"Y-y'know what? We can put it off until tomorrow," Tails said at last, "Or maybe next week, even. Let's just get a good scope of the terrain."

As the *Tornado* circled away from the castle, Rin made a few calculations. It was common knowledge that the Einzberns would surround their base for the Grail Wars with a powerful boundary field. Considering that flying over the place hadn't triggered anything, the height of the field was on the low side, or at least not as high as a plane could soar. Judging about how soon Tails' radar picked up on it, the size of the Boundary Field must have been...

Information was power. Even small details could change the direction of the battle.

"Still, I can't believe that little maniac has a castle." Tails commented.

"The Einzberns are a very old and well-established Mage family," Rin explained, "Their history goes back even further than the Tohsakas. And in that time they've been able to form an immense fortune to finance their Magecraft."

"You seem to know a lot about Illia's family." Tails noted.

"My family and the Einzberns have been rivals in the Grail Wars for 500 years, we've had a lot of time to gather information," Rin told him, "The more intel you have on your enemies, the better a chance you'll have of defeating them," A thought occurred to her. "What are the Mages like in your world, Tails?"

"Well, I had a run-in with a witch that was turning the people on an island into crystals once a few years ago," Tails admitted, "But beyond that, I dunno. My world has all sorts of crazy stuff. Besides Eggman, we've had to deal with aliens, ghosts, and lots more. 'Course, it's usually Sonic who ends up in the thick of it..."

"Somehow, I'm not surprised," Rin deadpanned, "He seems to enjoy being the center of attention."

"Yeah, he loves to show off," Tails chuckled, "But, you know? I couldn't think of a better friend if I tried."

Rin wasn't sure how to respond to that. From her perspective, Sonic was a cocky, borderline arrogant blowhard who did what he did because he wanted the applause that much, and never cared for the consequences. But she hadn't had a lot of time to get to know Sonic personally. Of the Masters and Servants, only Shirou and Saber were able to have a little 'down-time' with the Blue Blur. She wondered what exactly they did; It wouldn't surprise her at all if Shirou decided to ask Sonic for 'Hero lessons'.

Another beeping filled the air. "What is it now?" Rin asked.

"Looks like we've got another power signal, at about 4 o'clock!" Tails reported, "I don't think it's another Mage's home, though- this one's *moving!* "

What do you think, Archer? Rin asked her Servant, *Is it an Emerald, or a Servant?*

We'll know if we check it out, Archer replied, *But the question is, why would a Servant leave Fuyuki?*

Rin nodded, and said, aloud, "Take us in for a closer look, Tails!"

"Aye aye, Cap'n Rin!" Tails mocked saluted, and steered the *Tornado* towards the energy signal's direction.

It was odd things worked out sometimes.

Once the movie ended, Shirou expected that Illya would leave to ponder his invitation to join the alliance against Eggman. In fact, he had been counting on it. There was still grocery shopping to be done, and he couldn't do it if he had to entertain Illya all day.

What he didn't expect was for Illya to invite herself along. All told, it made for a louder shopping experience than what he was used to, as Illya kept trying sneak candy and other gourmet items into his basket. Luckily, Saber was there to try and keep Illya in line.

We probably look like parents taking their daughter on an outing, Shirou thought wryly as Saber and Illya's passive-aggressive bickering attracted stares. *I should be thankful that Illya hasn't brought out Berserker to support her argument.*

It WAS odd. Ever since they entered and left the theater, Illya had acted less like a Master and more like, well, a child. It was quite a contrast, but not necessarily a bad one.

As they left the marketplace, with arms full of bags, Shirou wondered about his next move. While he was glad that Illya hadn't acted out too much during the shopping, it was only a matter of time before she got impatient and possibly did something...intense. It was plain to see that she was waiting for Shirou to treat her a bit more.

Then he felt it. The warmth in his Mage Circuits building up...even though he wasn't performing Magecraft. It wasn't a powerful if he was, but he still felt the heat. He also felt that energy pulling at him, down an alley.

"Shirou, where are you going?" Saber asked.

Shirou didn't answer. He just kept walking. Saber and Illya exchanged confused looks and followed after him.

" *Onii*- Whoa! What's that?" Illya exclaimed.

It was a large golden ring, spinning silently in the air. Within it's hole was a void. And both Shirou and Saber exactly where that space led to. Sonic had told them all about it on his first night;

"Do you have any idea where these Chaos Emeralds are?" Saber asked.

Sonic shrugged. "Not a clue. But a good way to find them is to keep an eye out for giant rings."

"Rings?" Shirou asked, looking up from where he was putting down Sonic's futon.

"Ones big enough to fit a person," Sonic explained, "If you go into one, I guarantee you'll be in a special place where a Chaos Emerald is hiding- and if you make it to the end, you just might find it."

Shirou put his bags down. Without another word, he ran at the ring. He did not acknowledge the cries from either Saber or Illya. In that moment, nothing else matter. Something within him was telling that, above all else...he had to get inside!

"Shirou, stop!" Saber yelled, cursing herself for her hesitation. But before she could get to her Master, he dove into the ring's hole- and the both them, ring and Mage, vanished without a trace.

"H-hey, what's going on? Where did he go?!" Illya cried out, shaking with her eyes wide as Saber punched the ground in frustration. "*Onii-chan!*"

It was everything Sonic described and more.

Shirou found himself falling down a tunnel made of endless swirling colors. When his feet touched the floor, he was almost knocked off balance- the tunnel was moving backwards! It was like a conveyor belt, and Shirou had to run to avoid being swept away. As he moved, words appeared in his mind. They were like the knowledge of Servants that were granted to him as a Master in the Holy Grail War. But instead of statistics and rankings, only one simple message came.

Collect 20 Rings

And there *were* rings, identical to the ones Sonic and Tails had. They were floating in the air, just waiting to be taken. And take them Shirou did, though it was tricky. Because of the Special Zone's properties, Shirou was unable to just stop and grab the Rings at his leisure. Instead, he had to snatch them as he ran by. Thankfully, his archery training gave him the eyesight he needed to properly time his hands. The ones that were higher up were a bit tricky, but by reinforcing his legs, Shirou was able to make the jumps necessary.

From what Sonic told me, I need to keep gathering Rings, or I'll be forced out, Shirou thought as he ran, Luckily, this seems to be a lot easier than what he described. Maybe Tohsaka's lessons just made me so good it just feels easy!

Shirou quickly found himself eating his words a minute later. Just as he received the message to **Collect 40 Rings** , something else appeared to go with the Rings.

Floating bombs. Lots of them. They were scattered all over the tunnel, gathered in either bunches or chains, forcing Shirou to swerve around awkwardly. He wasn't as coordinated as he hoped, and ended up brushing against one.

Boom!

The explosion wasn't as big as he thought it would be, but it still hurt. As Shirou fell over from the pain, tumbling as the tunnel's momentum carried him, and saw that he had dropped several Rings. Panicking, Shirou tried to reclaim the Rings and gather more, but kept running into more bombs. The Rings' power protected his body from damage, but Shirou couldn't recover them when they fell. Soon, a new message appeared in his mind.

You Failed

A bright light filled Shirou's vision...

"We're practically on top of the site!" Tails announced. "I'm gonna look for a place to land! Keep an eye out for a clearing!"

"Wait, let's stay in the air for now!" Rin yelled, "I want to make sure there aren't any Servants around!" *Archer, can you see anything?*

I do, Archer reported, I don't think the radar was picking up an Emerald. Look down.

Rin did so, and saw a blue blur zipping between the trees. Her first instinct was to think it was Sonic, playing a game of some sort- until she saw a *second* blur close behind.

"Well? What is it?" Tails asked.

"It's Sonic, and he's being attacked by Lancer!" Rin said, trying very hard to keep track of the action.

"Really?" Tails asked, and began to look down with wide eyes. "Man, he's fast!"

Archer, get down there and support Sonic! Rin ordered.

Wait, I have an idea. Archer replied, and took physical form while standing on top of the bi-plane's wings. The *Tornado* wobbled a bit

from the sudden addition of extra weight.

"Whoa! Warn a guy before you do that!" Tails yelled as he wrestled with the yoke to stabilize the plane.

"Sorry, I won't take long," Archer apologized. *I am the Bone of my Sword*. Projecting his bow and a sword of fire, he said, "Call Sonic and tell him what I'm going to tell you- I've got a plan."

Lancer was hot on Sonic's trail, but trying to keep up with the Hedgehog was proving to be difficult. The closeness of the trees limited the room he had to wield his spear, and Sonic was clearly used to fighting in a forest. Sonic would zip out of sight into the shadows and launch attacks at Lancer whenever it seemed as if the spearman's guard was down. Luckily, Lancer was slowly getting the layout of the woods, and soon he would be able launch his own counterattack.

Let's see... Lancer thought, He suddenly darted off in this direction... but for what?

Lancer stopped next to a large tree. He had to treat this carefully. He didn't want to rush into a trap or ambush.

At that moment multiple bolts of energy shot down from the sky. Ordinarily, Lancer's Protection From Arrows ability would have defended him, but there was no need; None of the shots were going towards him!

It's gotta be Archer! Lancer thought, looking around in confusion. Dammit, Kotomine's gonna order me away from here any minute... but why isn't he aiming at me? That's never stopped him before...

Because of the multitude of shots raining down, Lancer didn't hear the ominous creak coming the large tree next to him, nor did her notice that the barrage was whittling away at the base of its trunk. He

did hear Sonic yell "Timber!" over the noise, but when he turned his head, all he saw was a lot of lumber falling in his direction!

"Argh!" Lancer cried as the tree fell on top of him. Sonic was directly on top of the tree trunk, grinning as he crouched down.

"I'm not one for logging, but I can't say I don't like the results," The Hedgehog smirked, which fell as he felt the wood shake. "Uh-oh."

Sonic leapt off of the tree, just as it became a bunch of splinters. Lancer stood up, livid and with a few leafs in his hair. He shook some wood shards off of his spear's tip and lunged at Sonic, but immediately a something red came between the two of them.

"I'm tagging in," Archer said as he blocked Lancer's spear with his two swords.

"Butt out, Archer! This fight's between me and him!" Lancer yelled, and tried to go around the bowman. When Archer intersected his path again, Lancer said, "How'd you even get out here, anyway!?"

At that moment a faint buzz entered Lancer's ears. He glanced up and saw the red plane flying overhead. He looked back at Archer and saw a grin under that white hair.

"You're kidding me," Lancer said, "Since when did you have a plane!?"

"Since we needed to get out to the countryside and beat you," Archer said. He put on a smug smile to infuriate Lancer, but inwardly knew he couldn't play around. It would only be a matter of time until Kotomine forced Lancer to retreat. He would have to finish this up quickly before that happened.

"Sonic!" Archer yelled, "Keep an eye on Lancer and make sure he can't get away!"

Sonic nodded, and got into his 'about to run' stance. "You got it!"

"Woo-hoo!" Tails cheered, "Looks like they've got Lancer cornered! We're about to be down one magic ghost!"

"I hope so," Rin said, looking down. "Lancer's tricky. He pulled out during my first encounter with him, and did the same with Shirou and Saber."

Tails looked back at her. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, Lancer's Master is cautious," Rin said, "He- or she- uses Lancer to get a feel for the opposing Servant's power before calling him back. Their strategy is probably to wait until most of the other Servants are killed before revealing-" Rin's words were cut off when the *Tornado* shook with a bang. "What the hell was that!?"

"Something hit us!" Tails yelled, and looked around.

Rin's eyes widened and she too began to search the skies. The idea that they might have attracted the attention of the Japan Air Defense Force hit her, and she began to sweat at the idea of a pilot reporting both her and Tails. But instead of the traditional planes she expected, something very foreign but very familiar could be seen in the distance. They weren't any aircraft Rin recognized. They looked more like...birds of some kind, an avian jet-plane hybrid of sorts. And they were coming their way!

"Tails! Something weird is heading our way at 4 o'clock!" Rin yelled, pointing.

Tails looked and blanched. "Those are Eggman's robots!"

Tails pulled at the yoke, and the *Tornado* veered away to avoid the robots. As the bi-plane righted itself, Tails spotted another squad of Balkiries flying in their direction. Growling, his thumb began to press down a red button on his console- only for an obnoxious beep to come out.

"What was that?" Rin asked.

"Uh, we've got a problem," Tails said nervously, "Remember how I said that the *Tornado* was all fixed?"

"Yes..." Rin said suspiciously.

"While I managed to get the wings back on and repair the engine..." Tails gulped, "I completely forgot about the weapons! We're flying without teeth!"

"What!?"

The Balkiries buzzed the *Tornado* again , shaking the plane with their gunfire. Rin shrieked, ducking down for as much cover as her seat could provide. Once the robots passed, she looked up and gave them the stink eye, trying to stave off her fear with righteous anger.

"I've *had it!* " She yelled, and reached into her bag of gems. "I'm sick and tired of all these... *machines!* "

Pointing, she waited until the Balkiries got closer and fired a *Gandre*. The spell struck one on the leftmost side of the squad, causing it to explode spectacularly. Unfortunately, Eggman had programmed his robots to take the possibility of one inexplicably blowing up into account and stayed in formation, adjusting their flight path enough to avoid the shrapnel. Nonetheless, Rin felt a small amount of satisfaction at the victory of Magecraft over machinery.

"Nice shot, Rin!" Tails cheered, "Get another one ready! I'll try to line us up!"

Rin grinned, and nodded. "Okay!" But as Tails began to spin and turn the *Tornado* into position, she felt her stomach lurch. *Ugh...I hope included a barf bag...*

However hard they were fighting, however fierce their battle was, Sonic and the Servants could still hear the explosion from above, and only had to look once to see the ensuing dogfights.

"Huh, more robots," Lancer muttered, "What are they doing out here?"

Archer groaned. "Considering that Eggman has Prana-detection technology, the real question is, what kept them?" *And I thought this would be a slow day. Silly me.*

"Oh man! Tails!" Sonic cried, and looked back at Archer. I gotta help them! That cool?"

Archer nodded. "Do your thing. I can handle Lancer on my own."

"Hey! Don't treat me like an afterthought!" Lancer shouted, annoyed. He then looked thoughtful. "What was that about a detector?"

Sonic ran over to a tree that had been partially uprooted and spoke into his communicator. "Tails, get down by my position, I'm taking the express and will be up there in a minute!"

Going into a Spin Dash, Sonic waited until the *Tornado* was flying 2towards him. Once the plane was close enough (Archer later asked how Sonic could tell while spinning, and got "Instinct" for an answer), released himself. With his amplified speed, Sonic shot up the tree like it was a makeshift ramp and flew into the air. Seeing him coming, Tails steered the *Tornado* so that Sonic could grab onto the landing gear. Once he had, Tails did a barrel roll, flipping the plane around so Sonic could hop onto the wings.

(Rin, meanwhile, held onto her seat and her tummy.)

"Welcome aboard, Sonic!" Tails greeted his friend, "Have a nice run?"

"I was, until Lancer showed up," Sonic said, and turned to look at the incoming Balkiries. "But I think some good 'ol fashioned 'bot-whuppin' might take the edge off!"

Sonic jumped at the Badniks and did a few Homing Shots. Once they were wiped out, he fell, landing on the *Tornado* 's wings as Tails flew it underneath. As the dynamic duo exchanged a thumbs-up, Sonic noticed a green face in the back seat.

"Hey, Rin," Sonic said, giving the Mage a friendly wave. "First time in the air?"

Only her intense desire remain dignified by forcing the vomit down kept Rin from answering. Instead, she pointed over Sonic's shoulder and shot an incoming Balkiry with a *Gandre*.

"Nice shot." Sonic commented.

Working together, the three of them managed to clear the skies of robots remarkably fast. Down on the ground, Lancer and Archer continued to fight. Of the two, Lancer looked the most aggravated.

"What's the matter, Lancer?" Archer asked tauntingly, "Running out of gas?"

Lancer snorted, "Ha! You wish. My cowardly Master is telling me to retreat. *Again*. Meanwhile, you guys get to fight other Servants *and* killer robots! The only person I get to fight is Sonic, and he always make a joke out of it!"

"Maybe you should consider changing your loyalties." Archer half-joked. He dimly recalled that in his own timeline, Lancer eventually turned at Kotomine, saving his and Saber from Gilgamesh at the cost of his own life.

Lancer rolled his eyes, though it was hard for Archer to tell as they exchanged blows. "Nice try, but I can't just swap sides because I feel

like it- Not how I do things," Lancer said, and broke away from the duel. "You just tell Sonic to quit running away and face me for once!"

Lancer darted off into the part of forest untouched by Archer's barrage. Archer ran after him, disappating his swords and Projecting a bow. He fired a sword at Lancer, but the Servant had seen it coming and deflected it with his spear. Before long, Lancer was out of sight.

Archer sighed. Some things never changed. He heard a few more explosions and looked up at the air battle. *And some things change too much. I wonder else is going to change?*

Saber smiled triumphantly. "Victory is mine."

"Nooo!" Illya wailed, "How could I lose?" She pointed at the Servant with an accusing finger. "You must have cheated!"

"Being a sore loser is not becoming for a Master of the Einzbern family." Saber chided softly.

Illya puffed her cheeks out and sat down, her arms crossed and a cross expression on her face. On the TV set, the words, "GAME OVER: PLAYER 1 WINS" still flashed on and off. A request to "Try Again?" Watching all of this was Shirou, who just returned from cleaning the bathroom. Quite frankly, the whole scene looked like something out of a sitcom. Illya, whom mere days before had tried to kill them all, had invited herself for some tea. And then a bath (Illya had not-too-subtly requested Shirou's aid, but Saber preempted that by joining her). And before long Illya had become a dinner guest. While the white-haired child waited, her attention was drawn to the Sega Genesis Sonic hooked up, and the two girls began their contest. Shirou wondered if he should tell Saber to let Illya win once, to keep the tiny Master's Urge To Kill lowered.

"Then it's this stupid old console!" Illya said, throwing a tantrum. "The buttons on the controller stick, that's why I lost!" She stuck her nose

in the air. "If we had been playing on my state-of-the-art Xbox, I would have whipped you!"

"You have an Xbox, Illya?" Shirou asked.

"Of course," Illya said, calming down. "As a member of the ancient and powerful Einzbern family, all of the best things in life are mine to ask for," She looked around. "This is a nice place, *Onii-chan* , but compared to the family castle, it's rather...small."

Saber recalled the Einzbern's central castle, the main base for their Magecraft. Indeed, it was truly more impressive than the humble estate Kiritsugu purchased during the Fourth War. That place she had been summoned in, the castle's chapel, was certainly larger and more beautiful than the shed she appeared before Shirou in.

Larger...and colder.

"We even have a smaller castle just outside of Fuyuki, *Onii-chan* ," Illya continued, smiling. "Hey! Maybe you can visit me sometime!"

"I'll, uh, keep that in mind," Shirou replied evasively, "But, thank you for your offer."

"But only you, *Onii-chan*! " Illya insisted pointedly. "You can't bring anyone else."

"I'm afraid I cannot allow that, Illyaseviel," Saber said, "As a Servant, I must remain by my Master's side." *I wonder if Irisviel's car is still there?*

As the two girls began to passive-aggressively negotiate the terms of a potential visit to Castle Einzbern: Fuyuki branch, Shirou heard the doorbell ring. He quickly ducked out to answer the door; It was probably Sakura and/or Taiga. He briefly realized that he would have to figure out an excuse for Illya's presence within the minute-and-a-half it would take for to reach the door and return to the living room. Maybe he could claim that he was babysitting...

When Shirou opened the door, he found that it was neither his underclassman nor his teacher. In hindsight, neither of them would have used the doorbell. Instead, something far more terrifying stood on the doorstep.

It was Rin.

"Hello, Emiya- *kun* ," She said, sounding a bit tired. "Sorry for dropping in without calling, but I thought we should have another meeting on what to do about Eggman."

"No, it's okay," Shirou lied. When Rin saw Illya, chaos would ensue. "But do you really think it's okay to do this by ourselves? Sonic went out earlier, and hasn't come back yet."

"He's with me," Rin said, taking off her shoes. "We bumped into each other while test-flying Tails' plane."

"What?" Shirou would have asked for more, but at that moment Sonic and Tails came in through the door.

"Welcome to *Casa de Emiya* ," Sonic said, leading Tails around the two Mages. "'Sup, Shirou. Have a good day off? We didn't."

Before Shirou could do anything, the two outsiders zipped around a corner and were out of sight. He looked helplessly at Tohsakah, and was completely misunderstood.

"Sonic was attacked by Lancer *and* we had a run-in with some of Eggman's robots," She explained, walking down the hall. "Nothing as big as the ones he attacked the school with, but still annoying."

"Are you all right?" Shirou asked, trying to keep up. There was no delaying it, now. He could only hope to keep all sides from destroying themselves, and more importantly, the house...!

Rin shrugged, "We got through it. Lancer got away, though, *and* we almost had a run-in with the Air Force. Ugh, that Sonic was laughing

all the way, too...I think he enjoys courting danger..."

That's when it happened. Rin walked right into the living room, and right in front of her was Illya, helping herself to a snack. The two enemies stared at each other for a solitary minute. No cacophony could be half as deafening as the silence that filled the minute. Once the sixty seconds were up, Rin turned to Shirou, her eyes full of hate and tears.

"She followed me home?" Shirou tried. If anything, his answer simply *increased* the fire in Rin's glare. The deceptive calm was broken by the sound of Illya biting into the apple with a loud crunch. Off to the side, Saber and Archer (Who materialized) stood still, but tense, ready to jump in if a fight broke out. All parties watched as Illya slowly chewed.

Before anything could happen, however, Sonic and Tails came in from the back yard.

"And *this* is where the living room, where I hooked up the..." Sonic trailed off when he saw Illya. She swallowed her food.

Tails gulped. "Uh, Shirou, Saber, did you guys defeat Illya and Berserker while we were out...or something?"

Illya looked at Tails in confusion before busting into laughter. "Teeheehee! Yeah, right! As if *Onii-chan* could beat me!"

"Yeah, good for you..." Sonic said, scratching his ear. "Yo, Shirou, can I have a minute?"

Sonic became a blur, and so did Shirou's vision. When everything returned to normal, Shirou found himself in Sonic's private room. The red-haired teen lurched, somewhat put off by the rapid motion.

"Look, I'm still kinda new to how things work around here," Sonic said, "Buuuut, where I come from, you don't invite your arch-nemesis to tea until *after* you've foiled their evil scheme."

"I'm trying to form an alliance with Illya," Shirou explained, "Remember what Tohsakah said last night, about the Masters of the Fourth War teaming up? I thought I could do the same thing now, to fight Eggman."

Two heroes, one actual and the other a wannabe, exited the room and began to walk back to the living room.

"Besides, I'm starting to wonder if Illya really *is* my enemy." Shirou went on.

"Isn't the same kid who had her pet muscleman cut you half?" Sonic asked.

"What I'm saying is, I think Illya doesn't really understand what good and evil is," Shirou replied, "She just...does whatever she wants."

"So this is one of those 'If I'm nice, maybe she'll become good' things?" Was Sonic's next question.

"...Do you think it would work?"

Sonic rubbed his chin. "Worth a shot, but the real question you need to ask is, 'What if it doesn't?'"

Just then, Saber came around a corner. When she saw the pair (More specifically, the part that held her Command Seals), her expression softened, though you had to look really hard to tell.

"There you are, Shirou," She said, sighing. "I have explained everything to Rin, Archer and Tails," Saber then fixed Sonic with a Look. "Sonic, please do not abduct my Master again."

Sonic pointed at the Servant and wagged his eyebrows. "I make no promises."

Saber rolled her eyes, though the edge of her lips twitched. Shirou suddenly felt a surge of jealousy when he realized that Sonic had almost made Saber smile...outside of mealtime.

The three returned to the living room, and found that an uneasy calm had settled over its current inhabitants. Tails and Illya were playing a game on the Genesis (Tails was purposely losing), Rin was seated at the table with a cup of tea, and Archer was busying himself in the kitchen.

Shirou decided that it was best to get the worst over with. He sat next to Rin. "So...are you okay with...?"

Rin sighed, resigned. "No. I'm actually getting used to you doing suicidal things. And what do you plan to do when Illya decides she doesn't need to partner up with us?"

Shirou shrugged awkwardly. "We're back where we started, the two of us against her. Anyway, aren't you the one who keeps saying that our own alliance is only temporary? What this cooperation any different than the one between us?"

Rin grimaced and turned away, her cheeks with a trace of redness on them. Shirou found himself smiling. It wasn't often he got the last word in when talking to Rin.

Meanwhile, Sonic zipped over to where Archer was. After a moment, he retrieved a stool to better look the Servant in the face.

"Does Shirou know you're wearing his apron?" The Hedgehog asked.

"I'd thought I'd make dinner tonight," Archer explained, purposely ignoring the jab. "He's made some progress, but if Illya gets a bad meal because of Shirou's clumsiness, it'll all go to waste. I'm going to prevent that."

"I heard that," Shirou said, getting up. He sounded unusually cross. "And I'll be the one to make dinner. This is my house, after all."

"Please, with your sub-par skills, it'll be a miracle to get something edible," Archer replied. "This is too important to leave in your hands."

Shirou marched over, clearly intent on making Archer eat his words. The dramatic effect was ruined by his fourth step, whereupon Shirou slipped and almost fell over. "Almost" made possible by the quick reflexes of Saber. The blond Servant caught her Master, and helped him up.

"Girls, girls, please, you're both pretty!" Sonic said, waving his hands what must have been a peace-brokering gesture.

"Are you all right, Shirou?" Saber asked.

"Yeah, thanks." Shirou replied, and looked down to see what he slipped on. It was a book. Bending over, he picked it up and looked at the cover.

Kiritsugu

"Oh, that's my fault, sorry, man," Sonic said, "I was flipping through that album the other day and forgot to put it back."

Shirou didn't reply. Instead, he opened the book. Behind him, Saber looked around his shoulder to see what was so compelling about the small tome.

It was Kiritsugu. There were pictures of Emiya Kiritsugu covering the pages. They had little amusing captions, such as "Kiri and Shirou-chan at the festival" or "Kiritsugu can't cook", but each one certainly featured Kiritsugu in one way or another.

But...it *wasn't* Kiritsugu. Not the one she remembered. That man had been a true Mage, coldhearted and completely focused on his goal. The man depicted in the photographs, however, wasn't. Carefree, relaxed, smiling...

"Wow, I haven't looked at this in ages..." Shirou said, flipping through the pages.

Rin, who had been interested in what Shirou was reading, came over to take a look. "Hmm? Who is that man, Emiya?"

"Huh?" Shirou glanced at his classmate. "Oh, this is Kiritsugu, my stepfather."

Off to the side, Illya let her controller fall to the floor. Slowly, she turned towards the gathered teenagers.

"Hey, uh, Illya, what's up?" Tails said awkwardly. He was ignored.

"So, this is the guy who raised you?" Rin asked, looking over Shirou's other shoulder.

"Yeah," Shirou said, "After he died, Fuji -nee put all of the photos we took together into a single album. I guess as a sorta memorial."

Shirou had been so transfixed on the pictures that he didn't notice Illya approaching him. She had walked around the three so she could be in front of Shirou. It was only when she reached out and tried to take the album did Shirou become aware of her presence.

"Hm? Oh, sorry, Illya. Did you want to look as well?" Shirou asked. Getting down on one knee, and held the album out so the diminutive Master could see. "This man here is the one who raised me. He saved my life during the Great Fire of Fuyuki, and after that adopted me,

"He...he was always kinda careless. He would just play around, and rarely took anything seriously. Sometimes he would leave the house for weeks on end, going to different countries..." Shirou trailed off when he heard a sniffle. Looking at Illya, he saw that tears were forming at her eyes.

(Saber, not for the first time, remembered that girl Kiritsugu played with in Germany)

"...Illya? What's wrong?" Shirou asked, worried. Illya was gripping the edge of the album

"Hey, Sonic!" Illya suddenly shouted. Everyone jumped slightly, and Sonic almost fell off of his stool. " *Oni- Shirou* told me that you and Tails are from another world!" She inhaled sharply. "What...what's it like? Is it better than our world?"

Sonic rocked back and forth on the stool. "Well, I'm probably biased, but I'd say there's no place like home. We've got a lot going for it. Hi-tech cities with flying cars, a floating island-" ("*A floating island?*" Rin whispered.) "-and my personal favorite, naturally-formed loop-de-loops everywhere.

"Now, I haven't seen much of this place, but I gotta say, I think it's got too many evil wizards running around. Also, I didn't see a single loop-de-loop while I was out."

That's something you could change with the Holy Grail, Rin. Archer suggested.

I'm not using the culmination of the Tohsaka Clan's efforts to fill the world with loop-de-loops. Was the immediate and flat reply.

I was talking about the evil wizards...

"But, all told," Sonic added, "The scenery's nice, and I do like the neighbors." And punctured this sentence by giving Saber and Shirou a 'finger-gun' point. Shirou smiled, which fell when he looked back at Illya. He eyes hadn't left one of the pictures of Shirou and Kiritsugu...the last one they took together before the latter's death. Concerned and a little confused, Shirou opened his mouth...

Rrrrrinnng!

Only to have his voice drowned out by the ringing telephone. Getting up, Shirou picked up the reciever only to have the most grating noise invade his fragile eardrums.

" *SHIROU!* "

The red-haired Mage reeled back from the phone as the voice of Fujimura Taiga echoed in both his head and the rest of the house. The proceeding incessant chatter certainly didn't help ease the pain.

" *ShirouyougottagetoutandgettosafetyImeaniteveryonesindangerand-*
"

"F-Fuji- *nee*, please slow down, I can't understand a word you're saying!" Shirou cried into the phone, hoping that maybe his voice was heard. It must have, as Taiga's next statement, though still loud, was slightly more intelligible.

"There's robot on the loose! It's here, in the district!" She shrieked.

" *What?!* "

"I just got a call from Grandpa, the entire neighborhood is evacuating! You need to *leave!* And *don't* do anything stupid like trying to fight it!"

"All...all right, I understand. I won't," Shirou said, feeling a bit guilty for his dishonesty. "You be careful, too..." Shirou hung up. After a moment, he looked at everyone around him. He then noticed that Sonic was missing. "Hey, where's...?"

Tails' communicator beeped. The fox answered it. "Hello?"

"Yo, I'm up on the roof," Sonic said, "It's hard to tell in the dark, but I do see something big and unwieldy coming down the street."

Very faintly, the rest of the group could hear a slight crash in the distance.

"Annnnd it just knocked a street light onto someone's house."

"Are you kidding me?" Rin groaned, "Why do we have to deal with this *now?* "

"Why not?" Archer replied rhetorically, "With three Mages...well, two Mages and Shirou, along with Saber and myself, this house is like a huge beacon his detectors."

"We can discuss the robot's reasons for coming here at later convenience," Saber said, her armor materializing. "We must first deal with our attacker. Shirou, where's my helmet?"

"So, that's going to be a thing..." Shirou murmured. Saber had the decency to blush a little.

"W-well, I cannot risk my identity being exposed..." She said, looking away.

"Wait!"

Everyone looked down at Illya. She no longer looked like she was about to cry, but she still looked angry.

While it was technically a head shorter than Frankly, the robot marching down the street was still much larger than anything the neighborhood had seen, with the exception of that semi that unloaded "Perfectly Legal Merchandise" for the Fujimura Group. It had body structure that was similar to the Egg-Robos Badnik model Eggman had used to attack Angel Island's Sky Sanctuary, but had much thicker arms and legs. Its light green paint job was a large contrast to Frankly's for boding purple hue, and on each of its wrists was a fully armed blaster cannon.

E-4156 "Humpty"

Nobody noticed the pair of robots floating alongside its wake. Compared to Humpty's gait, they were like little dots, one red and one yellow.

"Now, we're almost near the site," Orbot told Cubot, "Let's try to keep things professional, all right? We go in, grab the Emerald, and then

leave. No waiting for a news crew to show up."

"Then why did I bother putting on make-up?" Cubot asked, his eyes now adorned with false eyelashes.

"Please take those off."

As Cubot wiped his eyes, Orbot checked the device in his hands. It was circular in shape, had a computer screen showing a grid on top, and a drawing of Eggman's face on the bottom. A blinking dot appeared on the top of the screen.

"Hmm, according to this, a large energy source is approaching us," Orbot announced, "Someone must be carrying a Chaos Emerald."

"Hey, that's handy," Cubot commented, "If we get this done quickly, maybe we could have time to check out one of those karaoke bars without Eggman catching on."

"No, for the last time!" Orbot nearly shouted. This wasn't a new subject. "Those places charge an arm and a leg, the latter of which we weren't built to have. And you *know* I can't carry a tune..."

That was when Orbot bumped into Humpty's leg. The giant robot had stopped moving. Confused, the two robots poked their heads around its ankle. Up ahead, a small figure wearing a helmet stood in Humpty's way, a David to the robot's Goliath.

"Who is that?" Orbot asked.

Cubot gasped. "It's the Bug Queen!" His eyes narrowed as his vision did a zoom-in. "She looked taller on TV..."

That was a very accurate assessment. The person before them was about half the height of the lady who boldly challenged Eggman the previous day. Instead of the armored dress, this little girl had white dress with a purple shirt on, which looked even more incompatible

with the *Kamen Rider* helmet she over her head. The long white hair blow gently in the wind.

The otherwise cool appearance was promptly ruined when the 'Mini Bug Queen' began to strike strange poses, like the model for a modern art class.

"You cannot come any further, evil ones!" The girl declared, her arms arched into a square as her legs bowed. "Or face my power!"

Humpty bent its head down at the tiny figure. Then, it looked up. As a machine built for war, conquest, and general mayhem, it didn't have the capacity to physical display emotions. And yet, somehow, there was definitely an air of "Why me?" being expressed in that one gesture. Looking back down, Humpty did a quick scan of Kid Bug Queen and came to this conclusion;

Subject's energy level: 439.52%_

Likelihood of having Chaos Emerald: 86.28%_

New object: Get 'er_

Humpty bent down and lunged at Kid Bug Queen. Rather than doing the rational thing and running away, the helmeted child made a sweeping gesture and pointed at the incoming robot.

" *Berserker!* "

On cue, a mass of grey, chiseled-from-rock muscles appeared and body slammed Humpty.

Several houses away, the group watched the face-off.

"You took her to the *Kamen Rider* movie, didn't you?" Archer said, giving Shirou a glance was equal parts amusement and exasperation. Shirou pointedly ignored him.

"So...we're just going to watch?" Sonic asked, "That's no fun."

"I'm more worried about what might happen if someone sees Illya," Tails commented, "I mean, wasn't keeping secrets a thing? That helmet's not much of a disguise."

"Illya already cast a Boundary Field the minute she stepped out into the street," Rin explained, "That'll make everyone in the neighborhood leave, and keep anyone else from coming back. Besides, this might be a good chance to observe her and Berserker some more."

"What could we learn about them besides 'Crazy strongman and girl from *The Village of the Damned*'?" Sonic asked, giving Rin the Raised Eyebrow of Incredulity.

Saber remained silent, as well as conflicted. Besides the slight irritation of having to give up her helmet to Illya (She wasn't done with it), there was also...something else. A slight, nagging uneasiness that continued to nip at her soul. One that started up every time Saber saw the Master of Berserker.

She's just a homunculus. Saber would tell herself.

She's the enemy. Saber would tell herself.

That child should be Shirou's age by now. Saber would tell herself.

But no matter what she did, how much she tried, Saber could not stop thinking about that young girl Kiritsugu played with. And those thoughts continued to create the fear.

Fear that the person Irisviel loved the most was all but certain to die.

Berserker continued to hammer at Humpty, never letting up for a second. The robot tried to use it's larger size to it's advantage, but the sheer onslaught of blows did not allow for it to happen.

Berserker's attack had no elegance, like Saber, or was calculated like Archer, and it certainly lacked the playful energy of Sonic the Hedgehog. It was sheer rage, fueling an endless barrage of messy hacks.

Realizing that a change of tactics was in order, Humpty activated its rocket pack and launched into the air. This caused Berserker to stumble forward. Catching himself, the mad Servant glare up at the dark sky. Humpty landed further away, and aimed both of his arm-cannons at Berserker. It fired two missiles at the monstrous Servant, which struck him directly in the head.

Boom! Boom!

And out from the smoke came Berserker, who looked more-or-less unharmed, save for a few pieces of shrapnel stuck in his hair. The mad Servant bore down on Humpty, who wisely rocketed up and out of Berserker's path again. This time, Berserker wasn't quite so willing to patiently wait for the robot to come down. Turning on his heel, Berserker heaved his mighty stone sword at the rising machine, missing it entirely. (You try aiming when you're consumed by magically-imbued rag) Humpty landed on the other end of the street and fired more missiles. And Berserker again shrugged off the salvo, making another lunge at Humpty, who flew into the air again...

And while this went on, nobody noticed Orbot and Cubot, hiding behind a mailbox. Orbot was examining his computer, and Cubot was reading a volume of *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* .

"You know, maybe we should have gone to the karaoke," Orbot considered, pushing buttons. He glanced out at the brute fighting Humpty, then at Kid Bug Queen. "I could be wrong, but there seems to be a link between that... *thing* and the little girl."

"You mean it's a Stand?" Cubot asked.

"I don't know, maybe we're in a dimension where those exist." Orbot admitted.

Cubot got a far away look in his eye. "...That is so cool. "

Meanwhile, Berserker was getting angry at the repetitive nature of the battle. Granted, he was always angry, but Humpty's continued insistence on keeping its distance and firing (Useless but annoying) missiles drove that anger deeper and hotter. After taking another missile to the face, Berserker didn't just watch as Humpty inevitably rocket away. Instead, he *leapt* up, and grabbed one of Humpty's legs. The sheer weight of Berserker's muscles caused him to pull the leg right off, leaving Humpty with only its right leg remaining. It landed awkwardly a fair distance, and tried to fire another more missiles. But it was that moment that Berserker's sword came falling out of the sky and clunked the robot directly on the head. Humpty's was knocked off-balance and the second missile went astray.

"Incoming!" Tails hollered as the projectile tumbled their way.

Saber whipped out her sword, but Archer was already in action. Jumping up, he held up his hands and began to invoke a spell.

" *Trace On. Rio Atlas* ."

A giant, magnificent shield with a pattern like a multi-leafed clover suddenly materialized in front of Archer's body. The missile struck it dead on, exploding spectacularly.

"Neat." Sonic commented.

"I'll be signing autographs later." Archer said, landing.

"I meant the missile."

The battle between magic ghost and machine was going in a different direction at that point- down. Berserker managed to tackle Humpty and was currently, and repeatedly, pounding away at it. Over

and over, the Heroic Spirit of Herakles slammed his stone sword into the robot, never letting up. Humpty tried to blast him away with a point-blank missile, but the minute the machine raised his arm, Berserker just ripped it off and threw it into an abandoned house.

After that, the battle was over. What followed was nothing more than a brutal, ridiculously over the top demolition as Berserker proceeded to rip, smash, and pound Humpty's metal body into unrecognizable scrap.

Orbot and Cubot watched in horror at the sight of this brutality.

"...Y'know what? I think we've investigated this area to our satisfaction." Orbot decided, shaking.

"Yeah, let's ditch this and hit the karaoke bar!" Cubot gulped, and the two of them hovered away, unseen by all.

Berserker's merciless carnage continued for several minutes after that. Then, a little voice cried out.

"Berserker, stop!"

Panting, Berserker stood up. He looked down at Illya, standing next to him, still wearing the helmet. With inexplicably synchronized movements, Master and Servant struck a pose straight out of *Kamen Rider*. A cell phone floated out of Illya's pocket and took a picture. It was immediately snatched out of the air by a Blue Blur.

"Cute," Sonic commented, "Something for the scrap book?"

Illya grinned cutely and took off the helmet as the rest of the group ran up.

"Not bad, huh, *Onii-chan*?" Illya asked, shaking her hair out. " *That's* how a Master and Servant destroy a robot! Fast, complete, and absolutely *no witnesses*. "

Saber grimaced. That last part had clearly been directed at her. Besides her, Archer just crossed his arms.

"I wonder about that," The white-haired Servant said, "Your Boundary Field keeps people from seeing what happened inside of it, but some people *did* see the robot *enter* the Boundary Field."

Illya's smug smile dropped. "Uh..."

"Someone's eventually going to ask where the robot went, and what created the pile of scrap over there," Archer continued, "Not to mention the question of what messed up the street will go unanswered."

Everyone looked back and forth at the huge craters Berserker made in his fight. It looked like someone had taken a very large corkscrew to the pavement. They looked to Berserker, who narrowed his eyes in a way that was very unsettling. Therefore, the group looked to Illya, whose eyes were less unsettling by comparison.

Illya looked comfortable. "Wait, so...you mean..."

Archer nodded. "That's right. You're going to have to clean this up."

"...Nuts."

TO BE CONTINUED

Tiger Dojo

Taiga: All your base belongs to us! Tiger Dojo has taken over! I am your instructor, Fujimura Taiga!

Illya: And the Number One Student is the True Route's Heroine, Illya! Welcome to the show!

Taiga: You're feeling pretty smug right now, aren't you?

Illya: You bet I am. Not only did I get to go on a date with *Onii-chan* , but I finally got to fight one of Eggman's robots. It felt great! But, you know...

Taiga: Hmm? What is it?

Illya: Humpty, Frankly, Arms...the author given Eggman's robots some *weird* names.

Taiga: Eh, actually, the author didn't make those up. According to this official statement, he's trying to be as close to source material as he can, so...

Illya: Wait, so Eggman really *did* give his robots those names? Yeesh!

Taiga: No more delays! We must now answer questions. Our first one comes from Thunder Dragon; "How did Avenger sneak up on Amy and Bazzet and snatch The Chaos emerald practically from their finger tips?"

Illya: Oh, that's a bit of a spoiler, but Avenger being able to sneak up on people has to do with the fact that he's part of the Shadow bound to Sakura. And Matou Zouken created that Shadow by using mud from the incomplete Fourth Grail. Before papa had Saber destroy it, that Grail had absorbed all of the then-Servants except for Saber and Archer. As Avenger showed afterward, he apparently has the power of those Servants buried within them.

Taiga: Like Assassin's Presence Concealment?

Illya: Yes. However, I wonder what else he'll be able to do once he absorbs that Emerald's power...

Taiga: So very foreboding. Now, read us the next question!

Illya:Our next question comes from Alena- *san* . She writes, "Dear *Tiger-Dojo* , what kind of Servant would Sonic be if he was

summoned as a Heroic Spirit?"

Taiga: Ooh, that sounds interesting! A Servant's class depends on what kind of abilities and personality they have. Let's see, he drove a car during the racing games, which means he could be a Rider, or a Saber, since he got to be a knight once...

Illya: Personally, I think Sonic would be better suited as a Lancer, with his Hit-and-Run tactics.

Taiga: Don't tell Lancer that. He might take offense. In any case, our time has come to an end! Until next time, keep practicing, my students!

The Wicked Wild

Chapter 7: *The Wicked Wild*

"...Judging from the pattern and placement of the attacks, we can only conclude that whatever method Dr. Eggman is using to find his 'Chaos Emerald', is allowing him to track Servants, if not unintentionally."

When night had fallen, Kirie Kotomine had sent out the signal. As the Church-appointed overseer of the Holy Grail War, he had the means to call every Master fighting in the War to the Church. And in the darkness he had done just that, intent on delivering his message. After seeing the robots appear where Archer and Lancer were, Kotomine was forced to admit that maybe, just once, Rin might have had a point.

Not a single Master had appeared.

That was understandable. No Master would willingly risk exposing themselves by coming to the church. And although the rules stated that the Fuyuki church was a neutral zone, Kotomine well understood that for some people, the so-called rules of the Holy War were nothing more than guidelines.

That didn't mean that Kotomine's summons went unanswered. Instead of coming in person, the Masters had sent Familiars. Some the priest had recognized, such as Rin and Illya's; Having trained Rin in Magecraft, he knew very well that his unofficial 'daughter' used owls. And the magical wires shaped like a dove was identical to the creations of the last Einzbern homunculus to visit Fuyuki, Irisviel; meaning that it had been sent by Illya. He could only assume that the hunched over skeleton belonged to Caster, who's own Master was technically a normal man. And there was no way the hideous insect buzzing about wasn't a conjure of Zouken; Since Shinji had no Magecraft abilities, the old Matou clearly decided to gather intel for

his grandson. The only Master who didn't send a familiar was Emiya Shirou, who lacked the skill to do anything so rudimentary.

Kirie continued, "And so, as the Church's supervisor, I hereby call a temporary ceasefire in the War, and order all Masters to focus their energy on finding and neutralizing Eggman. And whoever can provide useful information to this end will receive an additional Command Seal.

"Furthermore, I will also reward a Master who can..." Kotomine paused, "...Take care of this blue Tanuki who has been less than discreet. Those who do this and bring me proof will receive a Command Seal as well."

"He did it," Rin reported, "He's announced a halt to the War until Eggman is beaten."

Kotomine had sent out the signal just as Illya had finished cleaning up the street. While she had repaired the pavement, Shirou, with the help of Sonic and Tails, had taken the remains of the robot and hid them in his storage shed. The red-haired Mage didn't think it was right to have Illya do most of the work on her own, as she had defended his neighborhood. Once they had finished, the group returned to the Emiya living room, whereupon both Illya and Rin sent out Familiars to answer Kirie's summons. Archer and Shirou, for lack of anything better to do, begrudgingly cooperated to make dinner.

"So, is there good news *and* bad news?" Sonic asked.

"Yes, and maybe yes," Rin said, "The Fake Priest is offering another Command Seal to whoever does the most to bring down Eggman. The problem is, he's also offered the same thing for whoever captures *you*. "

Sonic rolled his eyes. "You know, this is a pretty messed-up world when even the local cleric is against you."

Rin was about to lecture Sonic on how his public activities would expose Magecraft and bring the Mage's Associations Enforcers down to press the big, bloody-red mute button on the city. Before she could, however, Tails spoke up.

"Wait, how can this guy just give Command Seals?" The two-tailed fox asked, "Don't those just appear when you summon your Servant?"

"Not every Master who joins the Holy War wish to fight, at least not until the very end," Illya said. She was hugging the photo album. "Some Masters who lose their Servants can go to the Church for protection. In doing so, they must relinquish their Command Seals to the Church-appointed supervisor."

"So, that's how it works..." Tails murmured, "But why would they need new Seals? I mean, aren't the Servants and Masters already bound to each other?"

"Not every pair has a bound such as the one between Shirou and myself," Saber said, "Some Masters have tactics and ideologies that would sow discord between them and their Servant," *Like what happened between Kiritsugu and I.* "A means to enforce obedience is required in those cases."

"And to get your wish," Rin said, "The Holy Grail isn't a physical object. Only Servants can touch it. In order to use its power, a Master has to make his wish through the Servant. Losing your Command Seals is the same as losing the Holy Grail to your Servant's personal desires."

"So you need to force them to do what you want?" Tails looked stunned, "That's horrible! It's like...slavery!"

"No it's not," Illya said, "Servants are basically a form of familiar. They're summoned to enhance and aid the goals of their summoner. Their thoughts and feelings come secondary. That's why they're 'Servants'."

"Ah, kid, they're standing right there." Sonic griped, waving at Saber and Archer.

"It is all right, Sonic," Saber said, "For a knight such as myself, my role as a Servant in this War is no different than it was during my life as a human."

Sonic grumbled, and even from the kitchen Shirou could tell that he was not happy. Sonic was clearly a great believer in personal freedom, and the restricting rules of the world- That Mages had to be hidden, and Servants were bound to obey their Masters at the cost of their own needs and wants- obviously grated on him.

But when your most persistent enemy insists on trapping small animals in machines, it's only natural to develop such feelings, Shirou thought, it's too bad that the people of our world aren't as noble as the ones in his world.

With a sigh, Sonic stood up. "Yo, apron bros, how long until dinner's ready?"

"Only ten minutes," Archer called out, and gave Shirou a look. "It would be faster, but someone insists on stumbling around my kitchen."

" My kitchen," Shirou shot back, losing his train of thought. "I'm only letting you help out because it's better than having you annoy Saber or Tohsaka- san ."

"Yeah, you two have fun figuring that out," Sonic stretched his arms. "As for me, I'm going out for a quick run. I'll be back in time, but don't wait up," He pointed at Tails. "2nd-Lieutenant Tails, you're in charge until I get back. Keep the troops in line, all right?"

Tails gave Sonic a mock-salute. "Aye-Aye, Major-General Sonic!"

Sonic returned the salute and zipped out of the room.

"That... Argh!" Rin groaned, "I hate that Hedgehog! Why can't he get it through his spiky head that he needs to stay hidden!? For our sake, if not his!"

"To be fair, the only times when Sonic has revealed himself is when someone is in danger." Saber said. Though a part of her privately agreed with Rin on the matter of secrecy, she felt should defend Sonic. In a way, his straight-forward approach to life was a breath of fresh air after putting up with two Wars worth of Mage duplicity. And his willingness to defend those in need...if it wasn't for his complete and total disregard for authority, he would make a decent knight.

"Unfortunately, with the Grail War going on *and* Eggman attacking, everyone in the city is in danger," Rin sighed, "I wish he would take the long view. The exposure of Magecraft would have huge ramifications, and not just on the city."

"I think Sonic *is* taking the long view. Or, a different one." Tails piped up.

Rin looked at him. "What do you mean?"

Tails shrugged. "I've been with Sonic for a long time. He's probably thinking, 'I don't want letting people die to become a thing.'"

Rin found herself unable to respond. Not wanting to let people die... yeah, she could understand that. But it was a childish viewpoint. What good was saving one person if your actions could cause death of hundreds, maybe millions, further down the road?

And then Archer's thoughts appeared in her mind. *If you really believed in that, why did you save Shirou's life? After all, that amulet had power that could have helped you win the War. What's one hopeless fool's life in comparison to a power that could destroy the world if left unchecked?*

Rin sent a mental rebuttal back. But looking around, she realized that she was alone on this point. With a sigh, she rested her head on

the table.

"Oh, who cares anymore?" She asked the world in general, "He's already appeared on TV, what's the worst he can do now?"

In a secluded location at an address that was classified, Agent Stuart reviewed the findings he and Dr. Twice Pierceman had discovered in their investigations following Dr. Eggman's attack on Homurahara Academy. The two of them had been very busy since then, although their work consisted mostly of organizing evidence gathered from the investigations surrounding the mysterious events occurring before the great fire. The reason this needed so much effort was that due to said fire, most of the findings from those cases had been burned into nearly-unrecognizable ashes. And for some reason the detectives running investigations at the time inexplicably suffered from memory loss at key moments, and so their reports had been woefully inadequate. Other parts involved keeping track of the people Stuart put under watch.

But, slowly but surely, progress was being made. A girl from the Einzbern Family that Kiritsugu married into recently entered Japan around the same time his old assistant moved into Shirou's homestead. However, while Illyasviel had used official, well-documented channels, there had been no record of Saber arriving Japan, legally or otherwise. Interesting.

From what he could find, Kiritsugu's wife Irisviel had been one of the casualties of the Great Fire. After her death, Kiritsugu had separated from the Einzberns and became a full resident of Fuyuki, adopting one of the few survivors of the Fire, Shirou, as his son. (The rest, who remained at the church of Fuyuki, died of 'natural causes'. *That* wasn't suspicious at all.) Up until his death five years ago, Kiritsugu would leave the country for 'business'. Among the nations he visited was Germany, where the Einzberns held their secluded residence. And recently Shirou, Saber, and Illya had made contact.

Something is happening here , Stuart thought, *I just wish I knew what*. That was when Twice showed up. "Anything new to report?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," Twice said, and gestured. "Take a look."

Twice was Stuart's partner for their investigation. Originally, the two of them had been assigned to look into the mysterious deaths and fainting spells that had been reported by the media as the result of 'gas leaks'. Due to the surveillance footage of Tohsaka Rin and Matou Shinji at the sites of these so-called 'leaks', Stuart had been given the job of assistant teacher at their high school as his cover. Twice, meanwhile, was put in charge of a clinic to treat those who had survived the 'leaks' in hopes of finding a sign of poison or toxin in the victims. Unfortunately, his examinations had found neither; it was if the life had been forced out of the unfortunate. Essentially, the two of them were going in circles.

Amazing how much one blatant terrorist attack could change.

It had taken some creative interpretations of evidence to get the increase in resources and manpower. Luckily, the appearance of the mysterious hero who had appeared at the school (Dubbed 'The Bug Queen' by the media) allowed Stuart to convince his superiors that Eggman and the alleged 'gas leaks' were in fact connected; traces of surveillance footage from ten years ago, as well as random eye witness reports showed that strange, costumed people had been lurking around Fuyuki in the days leading up to the Fire. Notably, someone who wore the same kind of dress that the Bug Queen wore had been sighted at the docks and warehouse district.

After the robot remains had been gathered, Twice along a small army of technicians had been working tirelessly to analyze the technology. And they had learned much.

"...It's far more advanced than anything any country should have," Twice said as he led Stuart to his computer. "I mean, this is stuff that we would only be able to make several hundred years later."

...But not the ones that mattered, apparently.

"I don't care how good it is," Stuart said, rubbing his temples. "We're supposed to find out where it came from, and what they're looking for."

Twice turned on his monitor and began to type. "As far as we can tell, these robots are equipped with short-range energy trackers, of some sort. It's only a guess, but my theory that this 'Chaos Emerald' Eggman is looking for is some sort irradiated mineral, like uranium.

"Now, look at the findings we got when we combined Eggman's tech with our own."

A map of Fuyuki appeared on the screen. Several blinking circles appeared at various points on the map.

"Whatever power Eggman is looking for, it's being detected in several locations all over the city," Dr. Pierceman explained, "I've already sent teams out to examine the areas. We just need to wait for their findings."

"If they come back at all." Stuart pointed out. He had already recognized some of the locations, and none of it boded well to him.

First off was the Ryuudou Temple. According to his reports, the only residents there was the temple master's son, Issei, another acolyte by the name of Kazuki Souchirou, and his wife-to-be. Kazuki was currently on-file as the main suspect in several assassination cases, but there hadn't been enough evidence to convict.

In the center of another area was the Tohsaka Mansion, home of Tohsaka Rin. While the Tohsakas had a clean-enough record, the sudden murder of Rin's father Tokiomi ten years ago, followed by the death of his Aoi years later had left Rin an orphan. Not a good sign. The whole affair made her the ward of Father Kotomine Kirie, the priest of the local church. Normally, that wouldn't be suspicious at all, as the Tohsakas and Kotomines had been friends since the days

when the former family were secret Christians, but the church also had an energy field present.

The Matous, whose manor also showed up on the radar, was the source of many a dark rumor. So many members had died of 'perfectly natural causes.' So far, the only members still alive were the clan patriarch, Zouken, his grandson Shinji, and his granddaughter Sakura.

And last but not least, the Emiya property. Not only had Kiritsugu been suspected of involvement in several terrorism cases, but during his short life in Fuyuki, had developed a rapport with the Fujimura Group, a local *yakuza* .

Speaking of local problems... "We still haven't found Bazett McRemitz," Stuart mentioned to Twice. "Did she mention anything during her stay in your clinic?"

Twice frowned. "...No. I've reviewed the footage a hundred times. She didn't say anything about her plans after being discharged," He looked up, thoughtful and perturbed. "It's odd. I don't actually remember anything about her stay. If I hadn't reviewed the tapes from the bugs, I would never have realized that there were holes in my memory. From what I can tell, Bazett clearly did something to me...like hypnosis, or whatever. But that would be..."

"Crazy?" Stuart guessed, "Twice, considering what we've seen in the last two days, I think we may need to redefine the term."

"I wonder if I should still be part of this investigation," Twice murmured, "The more I think about it, the more I feel like a security risk."

"Oh, cut that out," Stuart scolded, "I'm not letting you duck out of this that easily. If I had to deal with strangely-dressed vigilantes, robot armies and living mascot characters on my own, I would just give up and declare martial law over the city."

Stuart looked away from the computer towards the wall. Like many other investigators, he had a pegboard covered in numerous clues, such as newspaper clippings and photographs. Not the most elegant-looking means of organization, but it was useful when he got tired of staring at a computer screen all day. He found his eyes drifting towards the photograph of Sonic, mugging the camera.

I bet you know what's going on . Stuart thought.

"Rolling around, at the speed of sound..." Sonic sang to himself as he raced down the empty streets. As he ran, he programmed his communicator's timer. *I bet I could go around the city in five minutes, tops.*

Sonic had no real destination. He was a wanderer by nature. To be expected to sit in one place was not his style. He did it whenever he needed to rest his feet, but once the novelty of had worn off, the journey would begin. Besides, there was still so much of the city he hadn't seen. And with most of the people indoors to avoid any possible attacks, he could do a little sight-seeing without possibly attracting trouble.

" *Aaaahhh!* " A voice in the distance wailed.

Aw, my guidance counselor was right, I can't go less than five minutes without getting mixed up in something! Sonic thought as he raced towards the scene.

Up ahead he found a young lady backed into a corner, her body shaking in fright. What had cornered her so badly gave Sonic pause; it reminded him of the creature that 'attacked' Lancer the other night, only much bigger and with more fangs and tentacles. It reared up, and lunged at the lady. There was a flash of blue in the darkness, and the thing hit a wall.

Several feet away, Sonic set the woman down. "You okay? It didn't get, uh, invasive, did it?"

The lady squeaked, her mind trying to come to grips with what was happening. Before she could muster a more coherent sentence, a shrill shriek filled the air...and it didn't come from her mouth. The attacking creature had sprouted another set of sharp teeth, only these were connected to a vocal chord.

"No way," Sonic gasped, "Years of adventuring and I finally meet a monster that actually gets uglier by the minute!"

Apparently, the thing must have understood Sonic, for it lunged, leaping high in an arc to pounce on the Hedgehog. It would take at least three seconds to reach its intended destination. For Sonic, that was more than enough time. Within that three-second-time frame, he zipped over to an alleyway, grabbed the lid off of a garbage can, and returned in time to smack the incoming monster. As the creature was knocked back, Sonic struck it again with a Homing Shot, grinding the monster into oblivion. Once he was done, Sonic took a moment to rub his head.

"Man, I hope I didn't get any of that in my fur." Sonic muttered, and bent down to look at the creature's remains. Something about the whole experience felt very familiar...

Looking back at the woman he saved, Sonic asked, "Hey, lady! I'm new around here, so I gotta a quick question..."

"Yes?" The woman asked.

Sonic scratched the back of his left ear. "I don't suppose anyone's blasted the planet to pieces recently, did they?"

She looked at Sonic as if he had just sprouted a second head. "No."

Sonic shrugged. "All right, cool," He looked around. "Look, where do you live? I'll take you home."

"I..." the woman pointed down the street. "It's on the other side of the river. I got off at the wrong station and..."

"Cool, hang on."

Before the woman even had time agree or protest, Sonic scooped her up and ran off into the night. In doing so, he was reminded of someone whose first meeting involved this action.

Hope you're okay, Amy...

"We're almost to the church," Bazett said, "Are you ready?"

"Wouldn't be here if I wasn't." Amy replied.

For Bazett, the day had unnervingly peaceful. She and Amy had spent the previous night searching for that Shadow man, time that would have been better spent looking for Sonic (in Amy's opinion) or preparing to face Kotomine (in Bazett's opinion). The only trace they could get of the former was a hysterical woman shrieking about a Tanuki invading her bedroom. Hypnotizing her into forgetting that and repairing the window was actually the least stressful part of that day. Giant robots, Tanukis, superheroes, and monster-making men...

The only remotely pleasant aspect of that evening had been the Rings. Once all of the madness had died down and she was sure that all of the abominations had been wiped clean, Bazett realized that somewhere in the course of their adventure in the Special Zone, she had managed to pick up a few gold Rings. While they weren't a Chaos Emerald, they weren't completely useless, either. As Amy described, the Power Rings would protect the body of the one carrying them from being damaged(though, as Bazett found after an unfortunate meeting with some broken glass, pain was entirely different matter). And after a little experimentation, Bazett had discovered that the Rings could be used to replenish a small percentage of her own Prana. Both qualities would be needed for the fight against the Priest of the Holy War.

Going after Kotomine in the face of every other problem had been Amy's idea. Her logic was that instead of worrying about the others,

they should focus their energy on the one they could solve easily.

"We don't know where Sonic is, we don't know where Eggman is, and we don't know where that shadow guy went to," Amy had said, "But we do know where Kotomine is. Let's kick his butt and get Lancer for you!"

And Bazett had to agree. With the situation in Fuyuki escalating the way it was, she and Amy would need help solving it. Lancer would be able to search the city better than either of the ladies, and depending on what he had seen, might already have intel on where Amy's friends were. Defeating Kotomine was now a necessary step towards fixing things.

And tonight was the best night to make an attempt at it. Kotomine had sent out a message for a meeting between Masters. From what Lord E-Melloi II had mentioned during his rare expositions on the 4th Holy War, when overseer Risei had called for a gathering, the other Masters had only sent familiars in their place. That meant Amy could scout out the church, and if Kotomine noticed her presence entering the Boundary Field surrounding the church, he would (hopefully) assume it was a familiar coming by to hear his message. The darker part of Bazett told her Amy was nothing more than bait to flush out the treacherous priest. Bazett forced that notion down, insisting to herself that Amy's job was just to case the premises, and the only reason she wasn't doing it herself was because her high Prana levels would put Kotomine on-guard. Still, she Reinforced her eyes as much as possible to keep her friend in sight.

Amy soon returned with no sign that she met any trouble.

"I couldn't get a good look through the stain glass windows, but I think Kotomine's by himself, mostly." Amy reported.

"Mostly?"

Amy fidgeted. "Well, I think I saw some birds or something. The lights were pretty low."

Familiars. "Was Kotomine talking?" Bazett asked.

"I think he was just wrapping up."

Bazett considered her options. She made her decision. "We're going in. I'll go in directly, while you move around in the shadows. He'll sense my entering his Boundary Field and go out to confront me."

"What do you want me to do?" Amy asked.

"You stay on the sidelines and provide support. And keep an eye out if anyone comes by," Bazett said, "I don't think any Masters will be stopping by if they've sent their Familiars, but it never hurts to be cautious."

Amy nodded. "Got it," She whipped out her Piko Piko Hammer. "Let's do this thing!"

"And what exactly are you planning to do?"

The girls whirled about. Standing directly behind them was a young man, who appeared to be Bazett's age, if not a few years younger. He was dressed in black, with a white coat covering it. Blond, with red eyes, his features were undeniably handsome. However, there was something about his demeanor that both Bazett and Amy found discomfoting.

But what bothered Bazett the most was the huge reserve of mana she sensed within him. No human being could achieve that level of power...not a normal one, anyway.

"My, my," The man chuckled, "I wonder why a pair of lovely young ladies are doing, skulking about in the bushes like thieves." His eyes narrowed, while his smirk widened. A moment later, said eyes focused on Amy, causing his expression to go from 'unpleasantly upbeat' to 'innocently surprised'. "Oh! One of those tanukis that have been appearing throughout the city!"

Amy rather weakly held up a finger. "Actually, I'm a hedgehog..."

But the newcomer wasn't listening. "I have to admit, I've been looking forward to finding one of you myself. Your blue friend has become quite the local celebrity, if not a bit obnoxious. However, keeping track of him is a bit of a chore. Kotomine will be very happy to hear I've found one."

Bazett felt a cold flash within her. "You know Kotomine?"

The blond looked at her suddenly. In an instant Bazett made her features neutral, but it was too late. He had seen the fear on her face. And it didn't take a genius to figure out what two girls hiding in the bushes were planning.

"Hmmm...I can't but feel that I've seen *you* before, woman," He said, giving Bazett a discerning look. "Something about you feels... familiar..."

And Bazett knew what that was. Given the large volume of Mana this man had, he was undoubtably connected to Magecraft. And if he was on friendly terms with the corrupt Church official, there was a very good chance that he knew something about the Holy Grail War...including the fact that Bazett was supposed to be Lancer's Master.

But the man shrugged. "Oh, well. It doesn't matter who you are, really," (Bazett did not feel relieved.) "What I *would* like to know..." A swirling vortex of golden light suddenly appeared at his side. "...Is what you're capable of."

Something shot out the vortex. With reflexes developed from many battles and other absurd adventures, Bazett and Amy were already throwing themselves clear of the projectile before it even fired. On a street corner far away from the church, a street light exploded.

"What the heck was that for!?" Amy shrieked, half-angry and half-terrified. She went to all-scared when she saw that another vortex

had appeared, now pointed at her. With an "Eep!" She jumped out of the way as yet another bolt of glowing death rocketed at her. She just barely avoided it, and behind where she used to stand a good portion of a building's wall became a wall surrounded by crumbling rock.

With rune-powered muscles, Bazett threw herself at the blond Mage (He was a Mage, right?). She had to capitalize on his momentary focus on Amy and end the fight quickly. Even though they were a fair distance from the Church, only a deaf man wouldn't hear the sounds of collateral damage- and Kotomine would. There was no way she and Amy could fight their current foe *and* a former Executor at the same time. She had to finish this, now!

But mere seconds before her fist could reach his face, red eyes turned to meet violet. And in that moment following, something hit Bazett and sent her flying. Rings exploded from her body, and the Enforcer's nerves felt like they had been set on fire for precious seconds that felt like hours.

But she was alive. And where there should have been a large gap in her abdomen was only a mild bruise. Remembering what Amy told her about the Rings' properties, Bazett desperately tried to grab them before they vanished. She managed to snatch up three.

A fourth was taken by the red eyed man.

"The same thing happened with Lancer..." He murmured, holding the gold ring to close to his eyes. He glanced down at Bazett, and then looked over at Amy. "I had thought it was a power unique to Sonic, but it seems these Rings are the key," *They do not exist in my Gate of Babylon...* He thought, and said, "In any case, when a king wishes for you to die, it is not in your best interests...to disobey."

Red Eye jumped back, putting both ladies in front of him. Behind him, multiple golden vortexes appeared, their ethereal light turning his form into a silhouette. They seemed to blot out the sky behind him.

Bazett sucked in her breath and gritted her teeth. This was going badly. Whoever their attacker was, he was clearly at a level beyond normal humans- even a Dead Apostile couldn't achieve this kind of power. There was only one way to save her and Amy's lives- a trump card passed down through the McRemitz family. However, using it cost a lot of Mana- power she was planning to use against Kotomine. But Bazett had no choice.

Even if we escape, this guy will tell Kotomine about us, Bazett thought, And Kotomine will use Lancer to kill us with a Command Seal. I'll have to kill him and wait for another chance to go after Kotomine...!

Meanwhile, Amy had brought her hammer ready to swing. Although there was a slight tremor of fear in her arms, her eyes were steady and narrow with determination. She was clearly scared, but unwilling to let their haughty foe see it.

But before anyone could do anything, a presence appeared. A tall figure, easily twice the size of the blond man, stepped up. In the blinding light of the vortexes, it was near-impossible to see their features. A pair of lights for eyes stared at the blond. He noticed, and turned his attention away from the ladies.

"And what, pray tell, are you supposed to be?" He asked as the gold swirls vanished.

With the return to normal levels of nighttime illumination came a better look at the newcomer. It was a robot, a tall and lanky one, colored in different shades of purple. Its eyes were like ping-pong balls, and there was a small spike jutting out from between and beneath them, like a nose. On the back of their head a long tube-like thing could be seen, bringing to mind a coonskin cap for some reason. On its back was some sort of elaborate, hi-tech rifle.

E-2764 "Davy Sprocket"

Davy looked the blond man over. It glanced at Amy, Bazett, and went back to the blond. Its thought processes went thusly;

Amy Rose detected_

attack?...maybe_

subject: masculine woman_

probability of possessing a Chaos Emerald: 54%_

subject: blond man with red eyes_

probability of possessing a Chaos Emerald: 99.9999999999%_

Having come to that conclusion, Davy walked over and gave the blond man a punch.

"Gah! How dare you!?" Blondie shouted, reeling back in shock more than pain. "I mean, what was that for!? Jeez!"

Amy took that moment to jump at the blond, hammer in motion. She wasn't even halfway to her target when another golden vortex appeared and shot at her. Rings rained down as Amy was sent flying.

"*Aauugh* !" She screamed as she landed in Bazett's arms.

"That was pretty reckless," The Irishwoman scolded, "Are you all right?"

"Kinda..." Amy groaned as Bazett set her down, "That felt like running into a spike times a million...!"

"Maybe we should retreat..." Bazett murmured, but before she could put those words into action, another shot from the blond man's vortexes grazed her side. "*Ahh!* "

"Bazett!" Amy cried, grabbing her friend to keep her steady. Her eyes widened when she saw the blood coming out of the wound.

"I'm not done with you yet." The blond man said coldly. Because he was glaring at Bazett and Amy, he didn't see Davy coming at him. The robot reached out towards Red Eyes...

twing!

...And plucked out one of his nose hairs.

" *EEEYOW!* " The man screeched, his voice causing several windows to shatter.

Davy held up the hair to its eyes for further scrutiny. A bright light drew the robot's attention. Looking up from the hair, it saw that there were now *one gigantic* golden vortex high in the air. It was easily larger than the previous wall of swirls by leaps and bounds.

" *What the Hell was that for?!* "

Further down the road, Orbot and Cubot floated towards their intended destination. Following the destruction of Humpty in the residential district, the two robots decided to follow another energy signature detected in the current area. Eggman had already sent another Sub-boss to investigate the area. Hopefully, Davy Sprocket would have already leveled the place. All Orbot and Cubot would have to do is pull the Emerald from the wreckage.

"We're almost there," Orbot said as he examined his radar, "According to the local directory, there's a church built on the site."

"Does that mean we might be desecrating a holy object?" Cubot asked, "Should we watch out for bolts of lightning?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Orbot replied, "If that sort of thing happened, Dr. Eggman would have been electrocuted years ago. Remember

that time one of his missiles tore up that monastery?"

"Well, just because it didn't happen on our world, doesn't mean it can't happen *here* ," Cubot pointed out, "What if divine retribution is a thing here?"

Orbot stopped. "Well..."

Before he could finish, two people rushed by him. It was Amy, who was helping Bazett limp away as fast as her injured body could allow.

"Run away!" Amy shouted as she half-carried Bazett.

"...Wasn't that Amy?" Orbot asked, watching them go.

"Never mind them!" Cubot yelled, looking around the corner of a building. "Check out *that!* "

Orbot followed Cubot and looked. Up ahead, an endless barrage of lights were pouring out from a glowing hole in the sky. The lights were blasting Davy Sprocket, knocking the tall robot around like an inflatable punching dummy. A fair distance in front of Davy, a blond man was shouting like the audience of a Jerry Springer show.

"Die! Die! Die!" He raved, "Suffer a thousand deaths for your idiocy!"

"Good grief!" Orbot gasped.

That got Gilgamesh's attention. He stopped yelling, and coincidentally, the hail of destruction stopped. He glanced over in Orbot and Cubot's direction.

"Is someone there...?" He murmured aloud.

Panicking, Orbot and Cubot ducked out of sight. Quaking in fear, they put their hands over each others' speakers in a desperate attempt to stay quiet. Gilgamesh turned around and began to walk towards that building. But as he moved, Davy Spocket, battered,

dented, and cracked in numerous spots, staggered to its feet. Shaking, it took its rifle and prepared to aim at Gilgamesh. A massive energy built up in its barrel. But just as it pulled the trigger, Davy's left leg gave out. The barrel of the rifle pointed down and went off.

BOOM!

Davy Sprocket was blasted back and crashed into the church building. As it struggled to it's feet, it ended up bringing down the wall.

Gilgamesh looked back at the robot with disdain. "...How pathetic."

The golden swirl appeared again, and bright light shot out of it and struck Davy Sprocket straight in the chest. The glow surrounding the projectile vanished, revealing that it was an ornate sword with a jeweled hilt. That too vanished after a few moments. Davy Sprocket, having taken so many similar hits, couldn't take it anymore. It's metal body began to explode. Naturally, this did nothing to help the structural damage the church had suffered when the robot flew into it. The steeple cracked, and began to fall apart.

It was at that moment that Kotomine came out. He had heard the ruckus earlier and watched as his partner blasted *something* into oblivion from the safety of the windows. When he saw the robot rocketing towards the church, the priest was forced to retreat to the lower levels for safety. He returned in time to see his beloved church now a broken shell of its former self.

After his talk with Rin, he had no doubts that the robot was here because of the Boundary Field surrounding the church. But repairing the damages...Kotomine clutched his head as he realized the repercussions of the incident. It was one thing to hypnotize officials into ignoring and excusing the events of the Holy War, as repairing the places and things destroyed by the fighting was never really his responsibility. This time, he would have to pay for the church's reconstruction himself!

As Kotomine tried to figure out which portion of the church's budget he'd have to murder to raise the funds, Gilgamesh strutted back up towards the ruined church. He gave a piece of metal a bitter kick. His left nostril still stung from having a hair forcibly removed. When he got closer to the church, he saw Kotomine staring at him.

Gilgamesh asked. "My room wasn't affected, was it?"

Kotomine groaned, and resumed massaging his temples. "I don't suppose your vaunted Gate of Babylon can pay for the reconstruction, can it?"

Gilgamesh pointedly looked away. "I suppose...after all, normal insurance policies don't cover robot attacks, do they?"

"Excuse me."

Kirie Kotomine was a busy man. Besides preparing for his duty as the Church-appointed overseer of the Holy War that was due to occur next year, there were also more mundane business he had to attend to. In this case, it was renewing the insurance policy on the church building itself. Due to an unfortunate accident, the business that normally provided insurance had gone out of business, so Kotomine was forced to switch providers.

Currently, he was going over the terms as listed in the contract. Before him, a representative of the insurance company waited for him to finish and sign.

Kotomine pointed at one paragraph. "What exactly is this?"

It was a claus labeled, 'Giant-robo explosion claus'.

"Oh, that," The insurance rep shrugged, "That's in case a giant robot explodes near the building. It's a bit expensive, but it never hurts to be prepared, right?"

Kotomine rolled his eyes and pushed the contract back. "I doubt I'll be needing that."

Kotomine groaned and clutched his forehead. He couldn't even muster a reply to Gilgamesh's question.

Gilgamesh, amused by Kotomine's discomfort, had already forgotten about everything else that had happened.

"What the heck was *that*!?" Cubot cried as he and Orbot hovered as quickly as their propulsion units would allow.

"I wish I could tell you," Orbot said, "All I know for certain is that before his destruction, Davy Sprocket transmitted the data it had obtained during its search to my Eggman Electric." He pulled out the computer he had earlier and began to check the input. "According to this, that blond fellow was in possession of an exorbitant amount of Chaos energy. More so than the Bug-"

Bonk!

Orbot was so busy reading the transmission that he wasn't watching where he was going. In doing so, he had run head-first into a mailbox. Groaning, he backed away.

"Watch your step." Cubot suggested helpfully.

"Thank you." Orbot replied. He would have included sarcasm, but experience taught him that his counterpart's audio receivers weren't advanced enough to pick up on such subtleties.

"Two sub-bosses in one night," Cubot remarked, "You wanna tell the doc?"

"I'm sure he already knows," Orbot sighed, "Let's go check on one of the Egg Pods and see if it's ready for retrieval. At least we can get *something* out tonight..."

"So, how many did you get?"

Back at the Emiya Estate, Shirou was telling the rest of the group about his close encounter with the Special Zone. He would have liked to wait for Sonic to return, and for Illya to leave before expositing about his experience, but the little whisp of a Master hadn't forgotten about the strange event- nor was she willing to leave what happened a mystery. She forced Shirou's hand with one simple question;

" *Onii-chan* , did that ring earlier have something to do with these guys?"

And so, doing his best to exclude information about the Chaos Emeralds Shirou displayed the Power Rings he had gathered while in the zone. A quick count revealed that he managed to take twenty-six.

"Hmm, so these are the things that Sonic used to fight Lancer with..." Illya mused, holding one up. "They don't feel that powerful. I wonder how they can withstand a Noble Phantasm?"

"You know what happened between Sonic and Lancer, Illyasviel?" Saber asked.

Illya gave a short laugh. "Of course! I had a familiar follow you guys back after we first fought. I didn't want *Onii-Chan* to die before I killed him," She flashed Shirou a sweet-as-snake-venom smile. "Only *I* have the right kill you, *Onii-chan* ."

Shirou gulped. He had mixed feelings on that statement.

And judging from the way Tails had shivered, the fox felt the same way. "Uh, but you're not planning to kill anyone *now* , are you?"

Illya shrugged. "During dinner? After the movie he treated me to? What kind of barbarian do you take me for?"

Shirou felt a slight sense of relief. So far, it seemed like Illya wouldn't restarting the hostilities...for now.

He and Archer had finished making dinner. The two, with tentative amounts of cooperation, were now setting the table. As everyone sat down, their eyes were drawn to one empty spot at one end.

"...Sonic's not here," Shirou said, "Should we wait a little bit more...?"

"Sonic said we should not hold back on his behalf," Saber said, a bit too insistently. "If he is late, than that is his misfortune. Let us put it aside for now. When he returns, he can heat it up-"

Whoosh! And Sonic was in his seat.

"I'm back!" The Hedgehog declared, "So, am I late-late, or just fashionably late?"

"You're just in time, Saber was about to eat your portion." Archer commented, earning a deadly glare from both the lady knight and her Master.

"She's not the first girl to make a grab for my plate." Sonic replied, thus turning Saber's stern gaze from Archer to himself. Rin joined in, if only out of principal.

Wanting to avoid the outbreak of another argument, Shirou quickly filled Sonic in on the Special Zone. To his surprise, Sonic didn't seem too bothered about it. Shirou thought that the Hedgehog would have been upset to learn that he had lost a chance to retrieve a Chaos Emerald (Although he didn't say so in front of Illya), but Sonic was surprisingly casual about the news.

"It's no big deal," The Hedgehog said, twirling his chopsticks. "Special Zones reappear after a few days. And Eggman's robots can't navigate them either. Let's check out the spot again later."

... I'm glad Sonic's taking this so well, but I wonder if we can afford to be so laid-back? Shirou thought, I just hope another Servant doesn't stumble upon a Special Zone...

"Is there a key to finding...Special Zones?" Rin asked, "I mean, does their placement follow a pattern?"

"Usually depends," Sonic replied, "My opinion, they just pop up in places nobody usually goes to, like caves or unused rooms."

"Great," Rin groaned, "With our luck, another Servant might find one before we do..."

"On the other hand, we're probably the only ones who know what the Zones are," Archer pointed out, "Even if a Servant were to stumble into one, they might not figure out what's going on."

Everyone was silent as they took that in. Illya in particular was suspicious. While she was genuinely flattered that Shirou had asked her out on what wanted to call a date (With Saber tagging along regardless), she didn't believe that her *Onii-Chan* was being completely straight. It was clearly obvious that the others were hiding things from her. But she wouldn't press the subject for now. She could find out later...

"By the way, shifting gears, but I ran into a weird creature while I was out." Sonic commented.

"What?" Shirou asked, breaking away from his worries.

Sonic waved his hand. "It looked like this...starfish-octopus, or something. With lots eyes. I destroyed it, but it looked like..."

"Like what?" Saber asked, her eyes narrowing.

Sonic stopped, and drummed his fingers on the table in thought. After a few seconds of doing so, he asked, "It didn't feel like a real

animal- and after I was finished, it just vanished into smoke. Any ideas?"

"It sounds like a familiar," Illya commented, "But none of the ones that went to answer Kotomine's summons looked anything like what you described."

Though they didn't know it, Saber and Rin were thinking the exact same thing. Sonic's description of his encounter brought to mind of similar encounters during the Fourth War; Monstrous creatures, that would kill and abduct anyone who couldn't get away in time. The foul summons of Bluebeard, the Fourth Caster.

It's impossible, Saber thought, But...could some foolish Mage have summoned that horrific Caster again?

Archer, meanwhile, had other worries. *That doesn't sound like anything that appeared during my run through the Fifth War. Dr. Eggman, that shadow-guy, and now strange familiars...What next?*

What else is going to appear?

This is so boring, Lancer thought as he leapt across the rooftops of Fuyuki, I wish something would happen that Kotomine can't drag me away from.

By the time Lancer had returned to Fuyuki, the Servant's mood had gone into the negatives. Having his battle against Sonic cut short again was bad enough, but a chance to rumble with Archer almost made up for that. However, that fight too had been halted, due to his Master's cowardice.

Now it was back to old grindstone...reconnaissance. Or, more accurately, (To Lancer) 'hiding in the shadows and watching while everyone else fights to their fullest.' After getting a taste of action from Sonic, Lancer's bitter feelings towards this tactic had not lessened. If anything, the brief skirmishes only whetted Lancer's for

straightforward battles. Unfortunately, Kotomine had forbid him using a hostage to lure Sonic out again, claiming that it might expose Magecraft. Lancer figured that by now, *something* had been exposed- people just weren't sure what word to call it.

A noise like a car blowing up below brought Lancer out of his thoughts. Stopping on the roof of an abandoned building, he stayed in the shadows to observe while remaining unobserved. On the streets, a small red figure was standing over a pile of flaming metal. As Lancer focused, his eyes widened, then narrowed, on the sight beneath him.

Another one!

Knuckles blew on his fist. There was something about punching a robot into scrap metal that was oddly therapeutic. And this Echidna definitely had some steam to blow off. So far, his search for the Chaos Emeralds were proving to be extremely fruitless. Not that he hadn't been able to find anything. Instead, what kept happening was that he kept getting signals that were like seemed to lead him to strange areas...and then vanish. It was incredibly confusing and frustrating. The only way the signature of a Chaos Emerald could disappear would be if it was taken off-planet (A possibility, depending on the local space program), or if it had vanished into a Special Zone. Knuckles himself had done just that, back when he had first met Sonic; Believing the Hedgehog to be a villain, Knuckles had taken the Chaos Emeralds and hid them in Special zones that had appeared on Angel Island. And it wasn't as if doing so wasn't difficult, all one would need to do was throw a gem, or several, into a Special Zone gateway. But for that to work, one would need to find said gates first, and from what he had learned from the occasional conversation with Caster or Assassin ("Those are weird names," Knuckles had commented) was that Special Zones were not a normal thing in this world. Knuckles had been able to find the ones on Angel Island easily enough due to knowing the landscape. What kind of person could find Special Zones in a matter of days?

...Well, Sonic could, as well as anyone who could keep up. But that was neither here nor there.

Gah, my head is starting to hurt, Knuckles mentally groaned, *I either need a lucky break, or something else to break.*

It was at that moment Knuckles saw it. Lying on the ground, practically undisturbed by the recent demolition act committed by the Echidna, was a coin. Knuckles blinked. Then, he shrugged and walked over to it. The tiny piece of currency wasn't the stroke of fortune he wanted, but he knew that every little bit helped. He bent over...

Whoosh!

...Just narrowly missing the spear tip as Lancer thrust it where Knuckles' head was.

"Dammit!" Lancer swore, "I cannot catch a break!"

Knuckles quickly noticed Lancer's presence and reacted jumping onto his hands and kicking the spear away. Lancer kept hold of it, but in doing so became left a huge opening- one that Knuckles went for. A gloved, spiked fist slammed into Lancer's chest, sending the taller man back a few steps.

"Augh!" Lancer gasped, his voice strained from the wind going out. "You hit a lot harder than Sonic ever did!"

"Sonic?" Knuckles asked, "The Hedgehog? Where is he?"

Breathing out the pain, Lancer stood up. "Hell if I know. The way that guy moves, he could be in Hokkaido by now."

"You don't have to tell me that," Knuckles said, grinning. His smile lasted for only a second. "So what's your deal? You just want revenge on me for what happened between you and Sonic?"

"Kinda," Lancer went into a fighting stance, "Let's just say that you sneaker-wearing tanukis are kinda messing up this War I'm in. Sad to say, you guys have got to go."

"I'm not going anywhere without the Chaos Emeralds." Knuckles retorted.

That was all the talk that was needed. Both men were impatient from their lack of success in their chosen fields, and could not hold themselves back any longer. The two charged at each other and the clash began. Thanks to his spear, Lancer had the longer reach and the advantage and with his speed quickly put Knuckles on the defensive. Thankfully, the Echidna's reflexes were good enough to keep himself from an unpleasant skewering. Instead of trying to catch the weapon, he used his fast punches to disrupt the path of the blade away from his furry chest. However, Lancer kept pressing his strikes, pushing Knuckles back. Behind them, a building was coming up. It wouldn't be long until they bumped into it.

Once we hit that wall, he's mine, Lancer thought, I just need to avoid hitting the wall...

Knuckles saw what was coming, by looking directly into Lancer's eyes. Reflected off of the iris' was the front. Seeing that, Knuckles quickly formulated a plan.

I've gotta do this just right, Knuckles thought, Otherwise I'm gonna look pretty stupid with a hole in my chest...

As they got closer and closer to the building, Knuckles put his plan into motion. As Lancer jabbed his weapon forward, Knuckles caught it with both hands. Then, he used the momentum to flip the spear up and throw Lancer behind him. This would have been painful enough, but the front of the building was a shop, and Knuckles' maneuver had sent Lancer right through the display window. A few bits of broken glass fell on the Echidna as Lancer's body took the full brunt of the destruction.

With Lancer briefly disposed of, Knuckles broke the spear over his leg. Or tried to. But a Noble Phantasm is a tool for a being beyond human understanding- it would not even bend.

"Ow! What's this thing made of?" Knuckles muttered, and with the grace of a Olympics athlete during the javelin toss, hurled the thing down the street.

The minute he did, Lancer leapt out of the store, his body a mess of cuts from the glass. The Servant glared at Knuckles, his eyes now a blazing red, as opposed to the normal even stare.

"I'm starting to hate you sneaker-wearing spirits." He growled.

Knuckles threw a punch, but Lancer dodged it and made a charge for the garbage can the spear had impaled. As he ran, he vaguely heard something that sounded like a piece of wood being run through a power saw. His mind didn't process that noise, as most of it was focused on getting the spear back. After his first battle with Sonic, Lancer had become rather protective of his namesake weapon. But just as it was millimeters from his fingertips, something rammed into Lancer that reminded him of his fights against Sonic.

Lancer and Knuckles went tumbling off of the street, a tangled mass of flailing limbs. The ball of violence rolled into an alley, up until Lancer kicked Knuckles away, sending him through a ground-level window. The Servant felt a small measure of satisfaction when he heard Knuckles' grunt of pain mixed with the sound of glass breaking. Knowing he didn't have long, Lancer rushed back, grabbed his spear, and then dove through the window after Knuckles. The opening led to a basement of sorts. It clearly had been unused for some time. There were some cardboard boxes, a some pieces of debris, and a fine layer of dust.

It did not have an Echidna.

"The hell?" Lancer looked around in confusion. "Where'd he go?"

As far as the Hound of Chulann could tell, there was no sign of Knuckles leaving. There were no holes in the wall, and the only door was untouched. He couldn't even sense any lingering traces of Magecraft, so it wasn't as if Knuckles had teleported away.

Perturbed, Lancer poked around the boxes, almost expecting to find his red opponent tucked away somewhere. When his half-hearted search yielded nothing, Lancer decided to try something new.

"Oh, he vanished," The Servant said loudly and deliberately, "I guess I should just leave..."

Walking as slowly and deliberately as possible, Lancer turned and made his way back towards the window. After five steps, he heard a rustle of movement. Whirling about, Lancer's eager grin dropped when he saw that it was just a box he moved falling over. Annoyed, he left the basement back through the window, resuming his patrol of the city.

Seconds passed. And then, a minute. Once three minutes and twenty seconds drifted by, a light appeared in the room. In its brief flicker of existence, it formed a ring in the air, and through its hole deposited Knuckles onto the floor before vanishing without a trace.

"Crud!" Knuckles slammed his fist onto the floor. "So close, too! Where do those spike-balls even *come* from?!"

Sighing, Knuckles stood up and glared at the space where the Special Zone gate used to be.

Oh well, finding one Special Zone is a step forward at least. And I managed to get some Rings out of this, He thought, I'll just have to come back in a little bit.

Knuckles pulled himself out of the window and looked around. He didn't see Lancer anywhere. The street was as empty as it was before the Servant attacked him. The stillness both worried and relieved Knuckles.

Laughing boy probably didn't see me enter the Zone...I hope,
Knuckles thought, *it would be a real pain in the tail if some nut like him found a Chaos Emerald...*

Knuckles wandered off into the darkness, continuing his search for the Chaos Emeralds. He was not fully aware of the dangers within the city. He knew of a few, but not enough to matter in the long run. He knew about the Badniks wandering about, grabbing small animals for Eggman to transform. He knew about dangerous people like Rider, Archer, and now Lancer lurking about. He did not know that Caster was watching him.

%Break%

Caster did not always monitor Knuckles. Fuyuki was a large city, and she needed to keep tabs on the other Masters and Servants. She especially had to watch over teams Saber and Archer- their close contact with Knuckles' friends would no doubt be trouble if not handled properly. The Emiya boy's attempt to befriend the tiny Einzbern girl was equally troubling.

But she was glad to have watched over Knuckles this night.

So, that is a Special Zone... she thought, her eyes gleaming under her hood.

TO BE CONTINUED

Tiger Dojo

Taiga: 1, 2, 3, 4, go! Blast off! It's Tiger Dojo! At the command is your instructor, Fujimura Taiga!

Illya: Co-piloting is Illya, the Number 1 Student!

Taiga: We're nearing the end of..

Illya: Waaait! The story's almost over?! How can that be?!

Taiga: Don't interrupt!

(Whack!)

Illya: Oww!

Taiga: I was saying, we are nearing the end of the *first arc*! The 'Sonic in Fuyuki' Arc! We are reaching the turning point in our story. Only one or two more chapters to go until everything changes!

Illya: Just a little bit more, huh? And how do you know about that? Aren't you just making stuff up to sound smarter?

Taiga: How dare you doubt your *sensei*!

(Whack!)

Illya: Arrgh! L-let's just answer the questions, all right?

Taiga: Our first comes from...huh, there's no name. Anyway, the letter says, "Do you consider *Sonic and the Black Knight* canon or not? The answer to that is yes! We are considering all of the games canon, in one way or another!

Illya: Except for the ones spun off of the Sonic Boom cartoon, for obvious reasons.

Taiga: The next question is from Thunder Dragon; "What is up with Rin's treatment of Tails and the gang?" Hmm, an interesting query, worthy of this hall...

Illya: It's because Rin is a barbarian, of course.

Taiga: Nooo, nooo, that's not it. Despite the image of perfection she presents to her classmates, Rin has a great deal of emotional baggage buried within her. Being raised by a mocking jerk like Kirie probably didn't help. The only thing she could really depend on was her Magecraft. However, the appearance of Sonic and his friends have thrown any expectations of a Holy War she prepared for out the

window. Like most traditional Mages, Rin has been raised to rely only on Magecraft. Sonic and his friends, however, are making strides with their advanced technology that Rin was taught to have no faith in. Being a classic *Tsundere* , Rin cannot properly express thanks for their aid, and is actually a bit jealous of how quickly the rest of her team, Shirou, Saber, and Archer, are adjusting to them. As such, all of these pent up feelings will come out in bursts, for now. Don't worry, I'm sure that as the story goes on, the walls around Rin-*chan* 's heart fade away, allowing our dear *Tsundere* to love freely!

Illya: But if she did, she'd no longer be a *Tsundere* , would she?

Taiga: ...The Dojo is now closed! See you next time, my students!

Whirlpool of Fate

Chapter 8: Whirlpool of Fate

Whack! Pow!

"Uhh!"

"Do you yield?"

Gasping, and his body sore, Shirou looked up at his opponent. Saber stood above him, a kendo tool in her hand. Off to the side, Sonic absentmindedly made another mark on a small chalkboard. The mark was the 33rd under the word 'Saber' that had been written on the top-left portion of the board. On the right was 'Shirou' under which had no lines. Instead, some deft hand (Connected to a set of blue quills) had drawn a not-too-flattering doodle of a face making a pained expression.

Nonetheless, Shirou stood up, gripping own training sword. "I'm not beaten yet." He said in a challenging voice.

Saber sighed. "Shirou, the point of these sessions is to instill you with proper battle instincts- One such instinct is knowing that a tactical retreat may be in order. Fighting until the bitter end may be romantic, but needlessly getting yourself killed, or even just mortally wounded, will not accomplish anything."

"If I'm going to get killed anyway, It wouldn't matter if I'm standing or running, would it?" Shirou asked as a counter.

"What you gotta think about is, ' *where* am I standing or running to?'" Sonic put in helpfully.

After dinner last night, Illya had thanked ' *Onii-chan* ' for his hospitality, and even invited him to visit her private castle. And while Shirou wanted to believe his attempt at a ceasefire between his own

alliance and the little Master had at least, the other girls and Archer were very vocal (After Illya was no longer in earshot) in their own collective theory that if Shirou *did* make such a trip, he would probably never return- at least, not with the same number of limbs he started out with. That, in turn, evolved into a discussion on how serious Shirou was taking the dangers of the Holy War. Saber concluded that her Master needed *more* training- which meant that sparring sessions happened *after* dinner as well as before breakfast.

Which led to the present. While Team Archer and Tails had returned to the Tohsaka Mansion, Sonic elected to once more stay behind and 'supervise' Team Shirou. And with that same cheeky smile, asked Tails to do the same, turning Rin's cheeks red.

Once morning came around, so did another training session. In another universe, these periods would be terse occasions. With Sonic, however, the lessons came with a color commentary, and they were not soothing colors, either. And while Saber's patience for jokes and quirky comments, as befitting a hero of legend, was high, Shirou was only a human. And therefore, he couldn't stop himself from retorting;

"If it's as easy as that, why don't *you* show me how it's done." And with that, Shirou tossed his training sword.

"Sure, I'm game."

Shirou hadn't really been surprised to hear Sonic accept the challenge. After all, this was the same Hedgehog who had thrown himself into duels with the likes of Lancer, Rider, and even Berserker. What the ginger mage hadn't been expected was for Sonic to expertly swing the sword around in a few practice chops that no rookie could do.

Saber was just as surprised as her Master. "Sonic...you know how to use a sword?"

"Oh, sure," Sonic replied, "It's not my style, but I once got sucked into a storybook and became King Arthur."

"What?!" Saber almost dropped her own sword in shock. Composing herself, she asked, "Sonic, are you saying that *you* are the King Arthur of your world?"

Sonic shrugged. "Eh, it was a one-time deal," At both Saber and Shirou's odd looks, he said, "Look, weird stuff happens to me. You think this is the first time I've been punted into another world? I once took a nap under a tree, and when I woke up, I was in this inter-dimensional tournament thing," He tapped his head thoughtfully with the *shina* . "I think that happened twice."

Shirou got over his stupor rather quickly. "So I guess the Holy War is nothing special to you, huh, Sonic?"

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to make light of your problems," Sonic said, "It's just, if you're a hero long enough, you become a magnet for all kinds of crazy things. You either learn to deal with it, or..."

... Or you die a hero's death, Shirou finished mentally, *No, not even that. If you die, you can't help anyone...* -An image of adult staring up at the night sky flashed through his mind- *...and you're no hero.*

Shirou looked into Sonic's eyes, and in that moment felt something. Truth be told, he had no idea of what age Sonic was supposed to be at. He had built up this image that the Hedgehog was roughly around his age, the way he acted like a rowdy teenager. But looking into those green eyes, and Shirou suddenly felt that there was a gap between them...one that could only be built by years.

"Okay, enough nostalgia," Sonic decided, and took a dueling stance, directed at Saber. " *En guard, mon cherie!* "

A King Arthur using French...I feel betrayed, Thought Saber as she took her normal stance, *But if he really did hold the title of King*

Arthur at least once...Her eyes briefly met Shirou's. That would explain a great deal.

Misinterpreting Saber's gaze, Shirou took it upon himself to act as the match's referee. He lifted one hand. "Ready..." He began to swing it down. "Begj-!"

" *Senpai* ?"

Shirou jumped. *Sakura!*

Shirou rushed for the door of the training hall. He saw the purple-topped figure approaching, and felt a rush of worry. He had to get out and intercept his underclassman, otherwise she might see Sonic!

Shirou turned around to tell Sonic to stay in the hall, only to see that the Blue Blur had vanished. Saber pointed up, and upon looking, did a double-take. Sonic was up on the ceiling, using two *shina* to prop himself.

"Good morning, *Senpai* ," Sakura greeted, almost tripping over her feet as she arrived. "Wha...what are you and Saber- *san* doing?"

"Just a morning workout," Shirou said, positioning his body to better block the door. The less Sakura saw of the training hall's interior, the less likely she would discover Sonic. "Are you doing all right?"

"O-oh, yes, I'm fine," Sakura said, and Shirou knew that was a lie. "I've just been having some trouble sleeping, that's all."

"Shirou," Saber said, walking up besides him. "I believe we have trained enough. Please clean yourself up, and we'll have breakfast."

"...All right." Shirou knew he had to move quickly. "Sakura, give me a few minutes."

It was probably the fastest Shirou had ever taken to get bathed and dried. He rushed it simply because he wanted to get to the kitchen and help out with breakfast before Sakura could do all of the work.

Saber was equally fast, though he suspected it wasn't to help set up. Unsurprisingly, Taiga showed up as well as soon as preparations were finished and the rather unorthodox family was eating. As the meal went on, Shirou took a moment to privately reflect that his bruises from training weren't healing as fast as they were during the spars. He noted that there seemed to be an inconsistency with how quickly his body healed...

"...So, you know that robot that was supposed to have attacked the neighborhood last night?" Taiga was asking in between bites.

"Yes." *I've got parts of it in my storage shed. Maybe I'll make a bird-feeder out of them.*

"What about it?" Saber asked.

"Well, it never showed up, right?" Taiga went on, "Don't you think that's a bit weird?"

"Er, ah, yeah, that is strange!" Shirou agreed desperately. It didn't occur to him until then that wiping out Humpty so completely within Boundary Field would cause more questions than letting it rampage in public. The lack of public closer might lead people to notice Magecraft...

"Well, that's because it did a U-turn and attacked the church!" Taiga proclaimed.

"What?" Taiga's words got the attention of both Master and Servant.

Taiga nodded. "Mm-hmm! I heard all about it from one of Grandpa's men! In fact, they might be talking it about right now..."

Taiga switched on on the TV. After a few minutes of surfing the channels, she found the news station. As a news reporter blathered on, workers could be see in the background either dismantling the robot, checking the damaged church-wall, or just keeping bystanders from getting too close and interfering. From the gist of the report, no

one was hurt by the attack, though what destroyed the robot was unknown.

Shirou had mixed feelings on the event. While it was unsettling that Dr. Eggman had attacked the neutral zone for the Grail War, the truth was...he didn't really like Kotomine. There was simply something deeply unsettling about the priest. It was a bit petty, but the sneering way Kotomine talked about all of the death and destruction caused by the Grail Wars set Shirou on edge. And Shirou felt this strange emptiness whenever he was in the Father's presence, something that was both repulsive and yet distantly familiar...

"Why do you think it went to the church?" Sakura asked.

"Dunno," Taiga admitted, crossing her arms in thought. "I figured one would come here because of Grandpa's connections, but it's not like that creepy priest guy has anything worth taking."

Shirou and Saber's eyes met. A moment later, Saber's eyes briefly glanced at Shirou's hand, where his Command Seals were. Somewhere in the inner recesses of his mind, Shirou's brain processed the faint sound of little feet rapidly running off. Sonic was on the move, possibly to investigate. By now, Shirou was no longer worried about the Hedgehog being spotted. As Rin had said last night, there wasn't much a second sighting would do.

I wonder if Tohsaka has heard about the church. Shirou thought.

Rin *did* know about it.

Even though there was no cable service, or even a television at the Tohsaka Mansion, she heard about it. In an attempt to better locate Dr. Eggman's base of operations, Tails had begun to use his Miles Electric to tap into local news feeds in hopes of getting information that might help in the search. That's how they learned about the incident at the Church.

Rin found this very unsettling. Especially since the news had interrupted an thaumaturgical experiment she was doing with the Power Rings Shirou had found. Still, she decided that it was best, as the Mage's Association's representative in Fuyuki, that she should check up on the situation. And since Kotomine was technically her legal guardian (She would *never* use the term 'step-father'), no one would find her coming to the church remotely suspicious.

When she arrived, most of the robot had been taken away, but the church was still crawling with workers. Local police and military had arrived, and were working together to keep civilians away from the scene. Inside the church, she could hear sounds like power-tools and other movements.

Archer, can you tell what's going on in there? Rin asked her Servant.

Give me a minute, Archer replied, invisible to all but her. He moved towards the church, and after a few minutes returned. *From what I can tell, the workers are both checking on how to go about the repairs, as well as searching the church.*

Searching... Rin mused, *They must think that a Chaos Emerald is there, even if they don't know what it is.*

That was my thought, Archer agreed, *Eggman basically announced to the world that he's looking for one.*

How's Kotomine?

Archer thought about his answer. *As far as I can tell, he's got the situation under control. Keeping people away from the more obscure parts of the building is a bit of a hassle, apparently.*

Archer was tempted- and not for the first time- to just warn Rin then and there about Kotomine's true nature, and the evil he was planning to do. He especially wanted to do something about those miserable, malformed prisoners Kotomine kept to refuel Gilgamesh's Prana. But doing so would mean revealing his own identity, as well as his true

nature as a Heroic Spirit. And that was a can of worms that Archer didn't have time to deal with, not with someone like Dr Eggman on the loose.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something blue on a rooftop. For a moment, he thought it was Lancer and instantly dissuaded that notion. If the spearman was watching, he would be doing it in his astral form. Instead, he realized that it was none other than Sonic The Hedgehog, no doubt having heard about this incident himself. Archer decided not to tell Rin, she had too many other things to worry about as it was. Besides, getting her riled up was losing its thrill.

While Archer mused, Rin marched right up to the church grounds. Before she could even take four more steps, a construction worker put himself between Rin and the building.

"I'm sorry, miss, but this area is off-limits for today. All unauthorized personal must leave."

"Father Kirie happens to be a member of my family," Rin said, sounding as innocent as possible. "Can't I go and see if he's okay?"

"Ah, the Father is fine, he's just being questioned by the investigators," The worker explained, "But no one else is allowed in until we've determined that the area is safe."

"What are you looking for?" Rin asked, using some hypnosis.

The man's eyes glazed over. "We're searching for the source of the abnormal energy this area is saturated in."

Rin's eyes widened for a moment, then she resumed her controlled expression. "All right, sorry for taking your time."

After taking a moment to modify the worker's memories so he wouldn't remember their little conversation, Rin walked away. Archer wondered how she would respond to this intel. He saw Rin push up

her sleeve, revealing the communicator she had gotten from Tails. She began to fiddle with the controls, and quietly began to curse from an apparent failure to achieve her intentions.

What are you doing?

Gah, stupid...I'm trying to call Tails on this idiotic thing, but it won't do anything! Technology is so worthless...

Archer tried to keep his message as free from snark as possible. *It might work if you turned it on . That switch on the side.* He added helpfully.

Rin shot Archer an annoyed look, and continued to fiddle with the watch-like device. After a few minutes of watching her struggle, Archer helpfully gave her a step-by-step tutorial on how to make a call.

" Tails, here. "

"Tails, it's Rin. Call Emiya and Sonic and relay this message."

"What message? What's going on?"

"I've got a plan to take care of Eggman once and for all. I need all of you to meet me and Archer at the following location..."

As Rin spoke, Archer glanced back at the church. He wondered where Lancer was...

Lancer was bored out of his mind. Rather than having him go about and continue his observation of the Holy War-slash-hunt for Sonic, Kotomine had called Lancer back to the church in order to help keep the government squads from discovering the church's hidden chambers. While Lancer wasn't sure what Kotomine had that was so important to hide (Heck, he didn't even know the church *had* hidden

rooms!), he still did his duty by telepathically alerting his Master whenever a worker got to close.

At this moment, Lancer wasn't really paying attention to his post. Like every other watchman in a dull place, he quickly became distracted. Luckily, Kotomine didn't notice, as he was still arguing with the insurance contractor whether or not the robot crashing into the church was covered by the policy. Drifting about, Lancer saw one worker hunched over on the floor. Curious, Lancer, invisible to all, looked over the man's shoulder. The worker had pulled a tile loose and put a hole in the floor. Now, he was fiddling with some kind of high-tech device. Although the Holy Grail had granted Lancer a decent summery of things within the current era, the Servant didn't recognize the machine. He could only guess that it was some kind of radio, judging from the speakers on its side.

What the heck is that? Lancer wondered. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted another investigator on a cell phone. The answer came to him in an instant.

Whenever something outlandish and Magecraft-related happened in Fuyuki, Kotomine would be one of the ones going out to hypnotize officials to report the events as a hallucination or mundane accident. But even if you convinced the public, there would always be one person who would be suspicious. But even if they had suspicions, without solid proof, it wouldn't matter what they thought. And so the cycle had gone on. Things happen, Church and Association cover them up, and suspicious people would grumble.

And then Sonic and Dr. Eggman happened. They were loud, in-your-face, and most of all, *blatant*. The only way to cover them up would be to cast a memory spell over the entire city, and no Mage alive today had that kind of power. And even if they did, the news feeds had already ready been posted online by dozens of eager nerds. Their very presence had viewers questioning everything they thought they knew about their world. Although no one really understood it yet, the veil of secrecy was *gone*. The old excuses were no longer holding water. The people wanted *real* answers.

And so, it came as no surprise to Lancer that some official decided now was the perfect time to go to the home of the ominous, shifty-looking priest and plant a *monitoring device*.

But after all of his recent troubles and humiliations, Lancer was in no hurry to tell Kotomine.

After receiving Rin's message from Tails, Shirou and Saber were quick to excuse themselves from the Emiya home. Shirou felt bad about leaving the dishes to Sakura, but recent events had convinced him that staying in one place without backup might prove disastrous. It would be a nightmare if a robot attacked the neighborhood again. He couldn't take the risk of Sakura getting hurt.

On their way to the pre-determined meeting point, the Master-Servant team took a mild detour. It was towards the movie theater Shirou had taken Illya to the previous day, though more specifically, the alleyway near it.

And there it was, just it had been yesterday. The entrance to the Special Zone, floating and spinning in the air like a wind chime in a lazy breeze.

"It's back, just like Sonic said," Saber noted, looking at her Master. "But we can't leave it like this."

"Yeah. Even if robots can't enter the Special Zone, real people can," Shirou agreed, "Worse, if a Servant or a Master were to find this, they might be able to use its power to get an advantage in the War." No point in putting it off. "I'm going in."

"Wait, Shirou," Saber said, holding out her hand. "Perhaps I should go in. As a Servant, I'll have a better chance of navigating the Special Zone..."

"...Than I would?" Shirou finished, a trace of bitterness in his voice. "That's why I have to be the one to go in."

"...Shirou?"

"Look, I know I'm the weakest member of our alliance," Shirou said, "If it hadn't been for you, Sonic, and the others, I would have been killed even before this War began. You guys do so much...please, Saber. Give me the chance to make a contribution on my own."

Saber did not look particularly moved by Shirou's words, but after a moment, she relented. "...All right, if it's that important to you, Shirou. I will wait here for your return."

Shirou smiled, and nodded. Turning back to the giant ring, the red-haired Mage took a running start and dove right into the golden loop. It vanished, and Saber was left alone.

Minutes passed. During that time, Saber found herself wondering at the way her Master went through life. It was so forward and open. A far cry from the way traditional duplicity of hereditary Mages, especially Kiritsugu. If it had been him, that assassin would have tricked someone else to enter the Special, while waiting in the shadows to kill and rob them when they returned. Shirou, on the other hand, was a welcome breath of fresh air with his sincere honesty. While he had a slight distaste towards the capricious nature of Mages, it was more out of a hope for their better natures- even if they did not exist.

Shirou wishes he could be a hero, Saber thought, If it were not for my duty to my kingdom, I would gladly hand him the Grail's wish.

Saber's musings were interrupted by a flash of light, during which there came the sound of a body hitting the street. The Servant wasn't too worried, as she had experienced something similar the day before. Once the light faded, she saw Shirou sitting despondently on the pavement. He had a look of disappointment on his face, but no Emerald in his hand.

"I couldn't make it to the end." Her Master grumbled, bunching his fists. Saber could see something glittering between his fingers.

"You managed to retrieve more Rings for us to use, Shirou," Saber said encouragingly, "And by entering the Special Zone today, it'll prevent anyone else from finding a Chaos Emerald."

"I suppose that's something..." Shirou sighed, standing up. He dusted himself off and pocketed the Rings. "I think I got at least twenty this time, though," He handed a few to Saber. "Here, take them. At least I can supply you with Prana this way. I only need one for my protection."

Taking hold of the Rings, Saber concentrated. She felt their power enter her body, and her own Mana increase. Each Ring only added a small amount, but it was more Prana than Shirou would be able to give her on his own. Normally, the bond between Master and Servant allowed the Master to supply their Servant with the Mana they need to exist in the world. Unfortunately, Shirou's skills as a Mage were so minuscule that Saber was forced to fight with her own personal reserves. The Rings would prove to be a useful asset. However, she saved a few Rings just in case of an emergency...

"We should go meet up with Rin." Saber said.

The Fuyuki harbor in Shinto was the place Rin chose for the alliance to meet up.

Sonic was the first to arrive. To his surprise, the entire place was completely empty. He had expected to see at least one or two boats, but the waters were free of vessels. Several crates that had been unloaded from previous shipments dotted the surroundings. The Hedgehog zipped around, taking care not to be spotted by harbor security. He spotted a crane and sprouted a smile. A desire to swing around by its chain had swelled up within. He heard someone coming and ducked into a warehouse.

There was an Egg Pod. Plain as the day outside, an Egg Pod was sitting in the center of the warehouse. A fence consisting of police tape surrounded it. Suddenly, Sonic knew why the harbor had been

abandoned. Investigators wanted the area off-limits until they could figure out how an Egg Pod had been placed.

However, it irritated Sonic to realize that the Egg Pod was still closed. *I mean, I can hear the critters crawling around in there!* Sonic was about to hit the button on the top when his communicator beeped. "Yo."

"Hey, Sonic!" Tails' voiced chirped, "We're all here at the docks. Where are you?"

"I'm in one of the warehouses," Sonic replied, "Just watch for the critters."

"Critters?"

Sonic jumped up and pressed down on the Egg Pod's button. The container opened up, and several dogs, cats, and other small animals flooded out of the machine. The warehouse was briefly filled with a mild cacophony of barks, yowls, and other noises. Sonic watched it all impassively. Eventually, they realized that the door was open and left, after which Saber entered.

"You were right, Tails, he is in this one!" The Servant called out, and approached Sonic. "May I ask what that was all about?"

"Just doing my part to keep the peace," Sonic said, hopping down. "Oh, and, uh, watch your step. I don't think some of those critters were housebroken."

Saber blinked, and proceeded to look at the floor *very* carefully. After the rest of the team showed up, Sonic filled them in on the Egg Pod and its purpose.

"So, the Badniks were putting the animals they took from all over the city in this thing," Shirou concluded, "But why put it here? Wouldn't make more sense to hide it to keep someone from messing with it."

Sonic shrugged, "Hey, I'm not complaining. Makes it easier for me, that's for sure."

"I don't think we should expect sensible actions from a man who tries to conquer the world by sticking animals in robots." Archer remarked.

"The fact that there was something like this here actually works in our favor." Rin stated.

"What do you mean, Tohsaka- *san* ?" Shirou asked.

Rin nodded and pointed dramatically into the air. "We're going to take down Eggman once and for all!"

While Rin wasn't expecting a lot of fanfare for her proactive declaration, the blank look she got in return was too subdued a reaction. Her mood soured even more so when Sonic began to tap his foot at sonic-speed, and the noise began to bounce off of the warehouse walls.

"Annnd we're going to do that, how?" The Hedgehog asked, "What, you expect to Eggman to come here and let that happen?"

"Yes, actually," Rin said peevishly, "Look, we all know that Eggman is attacking every place that has a sufficiently large amount of Prana around it- mostly those where more than one Servant is residing -so, we can set a trap for him."

"But why here?" Tails asked.

"There are several reasons," Rin explained, calming down. "One, the harbor is mostly an isolated point compared to the rest of the city. I've already hypnotized the staff here to keep them away from the site. It'll take a little bit, but after I've set up a Boundary Field, we'll be cut off from the city. We can crush Eggman without any interference from the military."

"And even if Eggman doesn't show up himself, by having the battle at the shoreline, we limit how far his forces enter Fuyuki," Saber guessed, "This is the foothold we need to guard in order to protect Fuyuki."

"Precisely!" Rin smiled.

"Better hope a ship doesn't come in." Sonic pointed out.

"There won't be," Rin assured, "I already checked the shipping schedules. Nothing is due to come in today or tonight. We've got the whole day to ourselves."

"So your big plan is to just wait for Eggman to show up?" Sonic asked, "Sounds boring, if you ask me."

"And what about the other Servants and Masters?" Tails put in, "Shouldn't we get their help, like from Illya and that Shinji guy?"

"I don't think it'd be a good idea to trust them," Rin said, "Remember, the Fake Priest just put a reward on Eggman's *and* your heads. We can't take the chance of either one turning on us at the last minute to get it."

Are you that's because you want to claim those Command Seals? Archer asked, and was promptly ignored.

"I'm going to set up that Boundary Field," Rin announced, "Everyone, go outside and keep an eye out for either Eggman's forces, I need a few minutes alone to set up the Boundary Field."

"And then, all we need to do is wait."

"I'm *done* waiting!" Dr. Eggman snarled, jumping out of his chair.

Cubot held up his hands imploringly, "Just a few more minutes, doc! And then..."

"No! That's what you said a few minutes ago!" Eggman stomped over to where Cubot was. "I want my breakfast burrito *now!* "

"But..."

Ignoring the yellow robots protests, Eggman snatched the aforementioned pastry off of the still-warm plate and stuffed into his mouth. With speed that would make Sonic green instead of blue, he chewed and swallowed his meal, then smiled with satisfaction. The smile dropped and his mustache drooped as Eggman's cheeks turned red. He began to wave frantically.

"Hot! Hot! *Hoottt!* " Eggman shrieked.

"I toldya it still needed to cool off s'more." Cubot said, and got cuffed in return.

A computer began to beep, and Orbot reported, "There's been an energy spike, sir."

Eggman inhaled a pitcher of ice-water, which lowered the raging heat wave in his mouth only slightly. "What?"

"The sensors are picking up a surge in abnormal energy on a coast of that city," Orbot explained, "It could be a Chaos Emerald reacting...or one of those super-powered kids we've been finding."

"Hmm," Eggman sat back in his chair. "Better check it out either way."

"All right, which sub-boss do you wanna send?" Cubot asked, and began to shuffle a deck of cards. "Or how about we let fate decide?"

Eggman smacked the cards out of Cubot's hands. "Would you cut that out? I'm going by myself on this one. Can't throw a giant robot at every problem!"

Cubot stared at Eggman in shock. "...Who are you and what have you done with Dr. Eggman?!"

"I concur," Orbot said, "Are you sure it's wise to go unattended?"

Eggman smirked, "Oh, don't worry. I'll be bringing plenty of Badniks to make. But a Sub-boss would attract too much attention. I'll think I'll go with something a bit more... *subdued*."

As it turned out, the Waiting Game was nothing when you had a portable computer with games uploaded onto it. And so, to Rin's deep frustration, the men of the group were hunched over the Miles Electric (Currently used by Tails) as melodious background music blared over its speakers.

"I can't believe you have your own video game." Archer deadpanned, watching the familiar blue figure bounce around on the screen, collecting rings.

"What, this? Just a little leftover from Sonic-mania," Sonic shrugged, "After I saved the world the first time, *everyone* wanted a piece of my pie."

"I still have the lunchbox and thermos set," Tails remarked as his fingers danced over the buttons, "It's in my workshop back home."

Saber stood off to the side with Rin, excluding herself so the pigtailed Mage wouldn't be completely isolated. She could tell that the Master of Archer constant state of aggregation was caused in part to how quickly her own Master, as well as her Servant, had gotten along with the outsiders. Besides, she had to talk to Rin about something.

"Rin, may I ask you a question?" Saber began.

Rin glanced Saber out of the corner of her eye. "Hmm? What is it, Saber?"

Saber paused, taking a moment to choose her words carefully. "... We know because of Sonic that other worlds exist. What I would like

to know is... What if the same person from two worlds existed in the same one?"

Rin looked at Saber the way you would a man who just grew a second head. "... *What?* "

Saber decided to try another tack. "Let us assume, for example, that there is a Shirou in Sonic's world. And it was *that* Shirou who came to this, our world, not Sonic. What do you think would that result in?"

Saber's revised question did not alleviate Rin's confusion much. The effects of inter-dimensional travel...as much as Rin prided herself on her skill and knowledge of Magecraft, that was something beyond her reckoning. In truth, the only one who could provide an answer with even a semblance of accuracy would be the famous ancestor, Zelretch, who supervised the formation of the Heaven's Feel. But contacting the Master of Second Magic was nigh impossible...

But it wasn't Zelretch Saber had asked. It was Rin. And so, the young Tohsaka Master steeled her resolve to provide the best answer she had available.

"...If two of the same person appeared in the world at the same time, it would be seen as giant paradox," Rin said at last, "The world they're in would try to eliminate correct, and both of their abilities may be...wait." Rin's voiced dropped to a whisper.

"What is it?" Saber whispered back, *A paradox...*

"Someone just entered the Boundary Field," Rin said in hushed tones, and sent the same message telepathically to Archer.

Nodding, Archer bent down and said quietly to Tails, "Pause the game and switch to the radar. We might have company."

"Okay," Tails did so and the screen on the ME switched to...static.

"Gimme a minute, I think being inside the Boundary Field is messing

with the radar," He made a few adjustments and the image focused onto a map of the dock. "Okay, lemme widen the view..."

The screen zoomed out. The entire dock area was surrounded by a circle, which was apparently the Boundary Field.. Several several dots were on one end of the dock, which was supposed to be the group. At the edge of the Boundary Field on the other side of the dock, two dots had just crossed over.

"Race ya." Sonic said and was off in a shot.

Rin buried her face in her hand. "I hate that Hedgehog."

The team moved quickly to the site of the intrusion. With Sonic and Tails hiding nearby, and Archer in astral form, Shirou, Saber and Run went to confront the newcomer. Saber changed into her armor, Shirou had Projected a sword (It looked a bit like Archer's, hmm) and Rin had a finger extended to cast a spell. Shirou noticed that instead of a jewel like the one she used during the battle against Arms, there was a gold Ring. Shirou wanted to ask her about it, but decided to wait until after the enemy had been dealt with.

Presently, the enemy had a mop of blue hair that made him look like a wakame. When Shinji saw the trio heading towards him, he was quick to put on a desperate smile.

"E-emiya!" Shinji said tightly. It was clear that the Matou Master hadn't expected to be discovered so suddenly. He glanced at Rin and his expression darkened slightly. "And Tohsaska, too..." It was unclear if it was Rin's presence he disliked, or the fact that it was accompanying Shirou's.

"Shinji, what are you doing here?" Shirou asked. He didn't see Rider anywhere, but that didn't mean she wasn't there. The purple-haired Servant could have been in astral form herself.

"I was just checking this place out," Shinji replied, his eyes darting every which way. Shirou wondered if he was looking for someone in

particular. "There was a Boundary Field, y'know..." That's when someone tapped his leg.

"So YOU'RE Shinji!" Said Sonic, who could move very quietly for someone who thrived in spectacle.

" *Gah!* " Shinji yelled, jumping. Rin clutched her forehead for the second time in ten minutes.

"So, where's Rider?" Sonic asked, completely unperturbed by either reaction. "I've got a PSA on personal space she needs to hear."

Shinji looked back and forth between Sonic and the other Masters, making noises like a clogged pipe trying to flow water. Shirou realized that if he didn't act quickly, any civility that could be had would be lost. Maybe a display of proper manners would help prevent a fight.

"Sonic, this is Matou Shinji, my classmate," Shirou introduced, "Shinji, I'd like you to meet Sonic the Hedgehog," He then added, "He's from another world."

"Uh...nice to meet you." Shinji replied, giving Sonic an uneasy look. He then looked back at Shirou and hissed, "Another world?!"

Shirou shrugged. At this point, he didn't care if no one else believed it.

"Shinji," Saber said, "Have Rider present herself. We are not here to have a battle."

"O...only if Tohsaka has her Servant appear too!" Shinji insisted, "How do I know that Archer isn't somewhere planning to snipe me?"

"That is totally something he would do," Sonic agreed, "But I doubt it. Not any building tops to look cool on."

Archer materialized. "That's not true. I look cool wherever I am."

Rin shot looks of annoyance at both Sonic and Archer before leveling her gaze at Shinji. "Happy, Matou? Now it's your turn."

As if by Rin's command, Rider resumed physical form. She stood next to Shinji, looking just as aloof but stoic as she had during Shirou and Shinji's meeting at the school. An ominous wind blew, causing Rider's purple hair to sway slightly but sexily.

Damn it, she's really hot. Rin thought, annoyed that her own sex appeal had been outdone. Aloud, she said, "So, are you going to answer Emiya- *kun* 's question, Shinji?"

"I *told* you, we were here to check out the Boundary Field!" Shinji said. Sonic was now zipping all around his body, giving the blue-haired teenager a stink-eye. It made him nervous and irritated. "After all, that priest said we weren't supposed to fight until this Eggman thing blows over, and- *What!? What is it!?* " This last part was directed towards Sonic.

Sonic held up a hand to block a drop of spit. "You're Rider's Master, right?"

"Yeah..." Shinji replied, taking the time to glare at Shirou for not keeping a secret.

"So, where's your Command Seals?"

"Huh?"

"Yeah, I don't see them either," That came from Tails, who was now copter-ing towards the group from his hiding space. "Shirou and Rin's have their Seals on their hands. But you're hands don't have any."

Shinji opened his mouth, but no sounds came out. Either it was due to Tails' question, or the fact that a fox-boy had what looked like a furry helicopter on his butt.

"They...didn't appear on my hands," He said at last, speaking slowly. "I can't show you where they are," He shot Rin what he thought was a suave smile. "At least, not until the fourth date."

" *Ugh.* " As one, Saber, Rin, Rider, and even Sonic shuddered at this remark. Shirou resisted the urge to roll his eyes, a reflex Archer indulged in, while Tails looked utterly clueless.

Annoyed at the response he got, Shinji said, "Anyway, don't change the subject! If there's not a fight going on, then what are you doing? Didn't Emiya say that Eggman's got this weird magic-radar?"

"That's what we're counting on," Shirou explained, "This is a trap. We'll be ready when Eggman comes."

"Oh...I get it," Shinji said, his usual smug smile returning to his face. "Yeah, all right. I'm in."

"What?"

"I'm going to help you guys out," Shinji went on, "In case you haven't noticed, Eggman nearly destroyed your Servant, Emiya. From where I stand, you guys would benefit from having me and Rider along for the ride."

Shirou wasn't sure how to respond. While he was a bit happy that

"Hmph," Rin said, crossing her arms and regarding Shinji through half-closed lids. "That won't be necessary. We're more than enough to take down that crazy geezer."

"What's the matter, Tohsaka? Afraid I'll steal your thunder?" Shinji asked, smirking.

"More like getting in our way," Rin said, turning up her nose. "This is going to be a serious campaign. I'm letting Emiya help out because he can use some Magecraft, but that's more than I've seen you do."

Shinji's expression darkened. "I think I might surprise you, Tohsaka." He unconsciously reached into the inside of his uniform.

As the two Masters bickered and exchange barbs, Shirou took that moment to take Sonic aside.

"Sonic, you're the one with the most experience fighting Eggman," The red-haired Master said, "Do you think Tohsaka's plan will really work?"

Sonic shrugged. "Eh. Could go either way, but don't get your hopes up. Baldy McNosehair's real good at the 'Exit Stage Left' villain thing."

Shirou didn't respond. And while he didn't see their expressions or postures change, he could tell that the discussion had drawn the ears of the Servants.

Sonic put his hands behind his head. "Besides, it's way too early for a final showdown. We've only trashed three of Robuttnik's big robots, and haven't even found his secret hideout."

"So this is all pointless." Shirou summarized.

Sonic gave Shirou a friendly pat on the leg. "Hey, if this works, it'll be keeping Eggman from hitting the rest of the city. You think *that's* pointless?"

Shirou nodded, feeling a bit of a smile. It was a philosophy he had lived by, ever since Kiritsugu died...no, before even that. Since the Fire, Shirou had always believed that if it was done to help other people, nothing he did was meaningless.

"So, after Fuyuki is saved from Eggman and this Grail War, what are you gonna do next?" Sonic asked.

"...Huh?"

"Any big plans?" Sonic went on, "Like, gonna have a 'We just saved the world' party? Or a beach trip?"

"I...I was just planning to go back to school," Shirou said, blinking confusedly. "I mean, when they repair the damages from Eggman's attack..."

Sonic raised an eyebrow. "That's it? No self-appointed reward? You're just gonna go back to normal, like that?" He snapped his fingers. "Dull, man."

"What do you mean...?" Shirou asked, "What's wrong with a little normalcy?"

Sonic looked Shirou in the eye. "I've noticed that you do a lot for other people...but what have you done for yourself?"

Shirou had no answer. Sonic's words had struck a chord. If it was someone like Tohsaka, or even Taiga saying them, he might have been able to ignore them. In fact, he *had* ignored them...

Shirou, you work too hard.

Why don't you relax?

Shirou, I'm worried for you.

And why not? They said those things, and yet had no issues with asking for his help anyway!

So why, now that they were coming out of Sonic's mouth, did they have such an impact?

"Something's coming!" Saber's voiced knocked Shirou out of his thoughts. He noticed that his Servant was staring out at the sea. Everyone was looking out in the same direction. Even with Reinforced eyes, Shirou couldn't see anything.

"How in the world can you tell?" Rin asked, "I can't see any boats or planes, or whatever."

"Instinct," Saber replied, "In my time, the sea was the place where our enemies came from. I've developed a knack."

"I hear something," Rider said, "A churning."

Archer Reinforced his eyes and focused on the horizon. He couldn't see anything on the water's surface, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw- *Aha, that's clever.*

"I think I see it," the Bowman reported, "Something under the water's surface. It's big, and it's getting closer."

It took a few minutes of staring, but soon even those who couldn't Reinforce their eyes saw the huge shape, blurred by the waves. This excluded Rider, although the churning noise she mentioned before was now audible to everyone, even Shinji.

Incidentally, the wannabe Master no longer had the confidence or dark fury from before. He looked rather like that kid who walked into a board meeting because he thought the door led to the rec room.

"Wha- what is it?" He asked, trying to hide his fear. He fooled no one.

"Betcha that it's a robot sea monster," Sonic said.

"No way," Tails said, "from here it looks more like an underwater attack carrier."

Shirou had the distinct feeling neither of the two Animals were taking things seriously. Rin's eye began to twitch.

"Monster-bot." Sonic insisted.

"Sea-carrier." Tails insisted back.

"Bot."

"Carrier."

"It's coming up!" Saber yelled, taking out her sword. She materialized her armor.

There was a massive explosion of water as the giant thing broke out from the depths and onto the surface. Luckily, it was far enough from the dock that the gang was able to avoid the waves it created. Except for Shinji, who was standing too close to the edge.

The intruding thing was a submarine, but only in the loosest sense of the word. All along its sides and top were turrets that were probably supposed to launch missiles. The top of the sail had a pair of circular spotlights that eerily resembled a pair of glasses, which had what looked like a giant metallic mustache propped underneath. On the very front was the insignia of the Eggman Empire. But most painful was all was the gaudy yellow color that the entire craft was painted in. It was like the evil twin of a Beetles reference.

Unseen by all, a tiny periscope popped out of the top of the submarine and swiveled towards the group on the dock. The eye using it narrowed.

They all heard the groan of metal. And then they the missiles being fired into the air.

Archer didn't even bother waiting for an order. Projecting a bow, he began to fire at the incoming barrage. His shots hit their mark, filling the air with explosions. However, he couldn't fire in time to hit all of them, and several missiles broke through the clouds of smoke. Leaping up, both Rider, Saber, and Sonic attacked a missile. While Saber sliced hers in half, both Sonic and Rider re-directed theirs away from the harbor, sending the ballistics back into the water. Afterwards, Rider flipped elegantly (And perhaps sensually) back onto the dock end, while Tails flew up and caught Sonic. Saber, meanwhile, just landed on the water, which caused those still on the

dock to gawk; the blond Servant wasn't sinking! Instead, she was standing on the water surface itself, as it was canvas!

"Spread out!" Saber ordered, jumping back up onto the dock. "You are sitting ducks if you remain stuck together!"

Meanwhile, the submarine continued its approach towards the shore. Hatches along the sides of the submarine opened up, and out from those ports Badniks of every shape and size shot out and at the harbor. Those that didn't have aerial components just tumbled through the air, and amazingly enough, landed on their feet (Or, in some cases, treads). Before long the entire harbor was swarming with Badniks.

Sonic launched himself from Tails and took a moment to blast a Buzzbomber out of the sky. As the Hedgehog landed on the dock, the rest of the team did as Saber asked and split up, for what little good it did; The robots were everywhere, and for each one that was destroyed, one or two more took its place. While Sonic and Tails zipped around trashing every Badnik in their path, the Servants stuck with their respective Masters, acting as a partner (Saber), back-up (Archer), or living shield (Rider).

"So," Sonic said as he zipped past Shirou, "Are we just gonna smash 'bots," *zip* "At random, or-" *zip* "-we gonna pretend-" *zip* "-to have a plan?"

"We can't let these things invade the city!" Saber yelled. the battle was causing flashbacks to the constant attacks on her kingdom. "We must route them at all costs!"

"Aye-aye, *mon capitain!* " Sonic flashed a salute and was off in another flash.

Archer, meanwhile, had a different approach to victory, or at least maintaining a stalemate. As he sliced through several Splats, he told Rin, "Rin, find a safe place to hide!"

"Are you crazy!?" Rin yelled, ducking as an Orbinaut shot its spike balls at her. She kicked it away. "Where do you expect me to hide in this crowd?"

"Just find someplace!" Archer retorted, "If you get knocked out or killed, the Boundary Field goes down and eventually the police or military will start to wonder why there's a *war* being waged at the docks!"

"Agent Stuart!" A man in a suit with sunglasses saluted, "We just picked up a message from Japan's navy; They've detected a large UFO heading towards Fuyuki."

Stuart rubbed his forehead. "Don't tell me. It's going to land at the harbor, where that abnormal energy field appeared."

"That's what they suspect, sir."

"...And what happened to the team that's supposed to scout out the situation?"

The agent looked uncomfortable, even with the sunglasses. "Um, I'm not sure how to explain this...but, every time they've approached the edge of the field, they've been compelled to leave it. In fact, if it wasn't for the automated reminder you programmed into their vehicle, they would have just come back instead of returning...fifteen times."

Stuart sighed. Somehow, he wasn't too surprised. It was already a proven fact that whatever was going on, a form of hypnosis was involved. The fact that the location of the current crisis had been the sight of two separate events in the days before the Great Fire. In the latter one, pilots reported seeing an enormous *thing* that would be more at home in a *kaiju* film, followed by what seemed like an alien flying craft.

"Is the bug I asked for ready?" Stuart asked.

"Yes, sir. The listening device has been installed and is working perfectly."

" *Good* . Have the squad send in a drone from a distance and scope out the situation remotely," Stuart ordered, "And then monitor and record everything you hear at the church."

"Yes, sir," The agent saluted, "May I ask what your actions will be?"

Stuart stood up. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of car keys. The key chain was a charm sold at the Ryuudou Temple.

"Let's just say that a good teacher likes to stay in touch with his students." Stuart said, giving the keys a jangle.

The air at the harbor was filled with robots, explosions, or exploding robots. And Shinji hated every last moment of it. Luckily, the sounds of the explosions and crashing metal drowned out his hysterical, girlish shrieks of terror almost perfectly. Rider's superior hearing being the 'almost', causing her to curse the gods- probably Zeus or Athena -who saw fit to pair her with such a spineless worm of a Master.

For Shinji, the day had gone to the dogs. His initial plan- to spy on Shirou and Rin, and possibly take advantage of whatever they were doing- had been derailed when they caught him. Luckily, Shirou had handed him the opportunity of the lifetime- an invitation to join in on their trap for Eggman. Shinji hoped that while his so-called allies were busy with the giant robot Eggman was supposed to bring, Rider would take care of the mad doctor and secure the Command Seals from Kotomine.

The giant army caught him by surprise, and as such, Shinji changed his priorities to "Escape and with his life". As such, instead of helping with fight, Shinji was putting all of his energy into running while Rider destroyed every Badnik that got near him. Which seemed to be

every one, which was more than even Rider's impressive abilities could handle.

"Ahh! Dammit!" Shinji pulled out a book began to flip through the pages. He pointed his free hand at a Coconuts. His shadow shot out and struck the robot, knocking it over. And then Tails bounced off it, breaking the thing, and flew off. From the wreckage came a cat, which ran out between Shinji's legs and almost tripped him up.

"Whoa!" Shinji gasped, desperately fumbling to avoid dropping the book. He actually fell over catching it, but managed to keep the tome in his hands. Shinji exhaled a sigh of relief.

The book he carried was more than a mere tome. It was a magical artifact called the Book of False Attendant; it contained Rider's Command Seals, and allowed Shinji to access Rider's mana for spells. It was Sakura who summoned Rider, forced by their grandfather Zouken. But Sakura couldn't bring herself to put herself in the line of fire, leading Shinji to shoehorn himself in. Zouken didn't care which of his grandchildren secured the Grail, and allowed Shinji to use the Book to gain Rider's Command Seals. Rin was right about Shinji, he *wasn't* a proper Master, or even a Mage. But as long as Shinji had the Book, he could fake it.

And then a Newtron, a robot built like a chameleon with invisibility functions, appeared out of nowhere and snatched the Book out of Shinji's hands.

"Gah!" Shinji yelled, and tried to take the Book back. "No! Bad robot! Give- Uh! It! Back!"

The Newtron just hissed, and proved to have a stronger grip than such a cartoonish-looking thing appeared to have.

"Rider!" Shinji called out, "Help!"

Why doesn't he just use the Book's power to blast it? Rider thought as she threw one of her metal stakes at the robot. From the

wreckage came a

The sudden destruction of the Newtron took Shinji by surprise. He hadn't expected Rider's response to be *that* swift, and when the robot blew up, he ended up falling over...inadvertently losing his grip on the tome.

" *Aaaarrgghh! Nonononono!* " Shinji wailed, and scrambled after the Book. Showing a level of agility and coordination not displayed before, he and darted around robots, gunfire, and occasionally, a speeding animal-person in pursuit of the tumbling tome as it bounced and slid across the pavement. Much to Shinji's horror, it landed at the edge of the pier, precariously balanced between land and sea. Shinji's horror increased when a Crabmeat walked up and picked the Book up. It regarded the abnormal tome with inquisitive, robotic eyes.

"Boom! Headshot!" Sonic yelled as he zipped by and rendered the Badnik into shrapnel, freeing a parrot. The Book fell to the ground, landing a step and a half away from the flaming wreckage. Shinji let out a sigh of relief.

And then *another* piece of flaming shrapnel fell out of the sky, the remains of a Buzzbomber, and landed directly on the Book. The tome was set on in and became ashes in seconds. Shinji felt a tear well appear in his eye. His jaw began to tremble.

At the Ryuudou Temple Gate, Asassin looked up from his magazine. After a moment, he resumed reading. It was probably nothing.

"Whoa! Keep the language PG, pal!" Sonic yelled, rushing by and pulling Shinji away from danger. "There are kids in the audience!"

" *I hate you, Hedgehog!* " Shinji hollered, trying and failing to throttle Sonic.

"Oh, relax," Sonic said dismissively, "(Hey, you're pretty lite) You can get another book off the internet. By the way, where'd Rider go? She just vanished!"

Rider, with whatever ties she had with Shinji incinerated, had chosen to take her leave. After all, it wasn't like she was *actually* his Servant. As robots exploded all around them, Sonic carried Shinji into one of the warehouses. He deposited the now ex- *faux*- Master onto the floor and glanced out a window. At that moment, an Egg Pawn came crashing through the glass and landed right in front of them. Just as the oval-shaped thing struggled to its feet, Sonic shattered it with a Homing Shot. A baby deer ran off.

"Nara Park is that way, little fella!" Sonic yelled helpfully to the departing doe. He turned to Shinji. "Look, I dunno why Rider just bailed on us- Well, you, really. -but why not just hang here until every calms down?" Before Shinji could respond with some profanity, he raced off. "Just stay away from the Egg Pod!"

"...#%\$& you!" Shinji yelled after a moment. He turned around bitterly. "What the Hell's a Egg Pod...?"

He got his answer when he saw the oversized, empty container lying in the middle of the warehouse. The police tape had been torn down by the released animals, and there were a few wet spots on the floor around it. Curiosity overtook fear and rage, and so Shinji approached the device. Walking past the police tape, he peered into the empty space.

"Why does it smell like a pet store...?" He muttered, leaning in.

Shinji was also stepping on a wet spot. He slipped, tumbled into the Egg Pod, and hit his head on the central pillar.

And then fate stepped in.

The doors to Egg Pod slammed shut. Panicking, Shinji began to bang on the metal, a feat made difficult due to his lack of room.

And then Orbot and Cubot floated in.

"I don't see why we have to go on collection duty now," Cubot griped, "I mean, how are we gonna get this thing into the sub without anyone noticing? It's a madhouse out there!"

"We'll just send it through the pad we set up earlier," Orbot replied, and pushed a button on the Egg Pod's side. "I'm sure if we're quite, we can leave this harbor uninhibited."

The Egg Pod hummed, and its stands retracted. A quartet of jets unfolded from other areas of the Pod's bottom. The Egg Pod hovered in the air.

"Boy, I'm sure glad the doc started making these things float!" Cubot chirped as he and Orbot led the Egg Pod away. He guided it on its left.

"Yes, the repulsers certainly make our job easier, don't they?" Orbot replied, pushing on the right. "And thanks to the sound-proof metal, we don't have to hear any noises the critters might make!"

Inside the Egg Pod, Shinji began to cry.

Outside, the submarine launched another slew of missiles. Archer shot every one down, and then kicked at a Grounder that was rolling up to him. The Badniks had noticed that Archer was the one blasting the salvos out of the sky, and were occasionally making an attempt to stop him. The fact that Archer could kick one with enough force to break a robot apart was one of the reasons why they weren't making a greater effort. The other reason was that the rest of the heroes were able to hold their own against the Badniks, even Shirou. (Rider and Shinji, unsurprisingly, had gone MIA.)

But Archer felt that the battle had reached a stalemate. While all of them were able to fight off the attacking robots, there seemed to be

no end to the Badniks. Every time they managed to thin the throng just a little bit, another horde of robots appeared to take their place.

"How many robots does this guy have!?" Archer yelled to Tails, "I feel like we're going to be here until nightfall!"

"Just keep an eye out for Eggman!" Tails replied, swinging around to catch a Crabmeat by his namesakes. "He should be making his appearance sooner or later! Where's Rin?"

"I had her go into hiding," Archer explained, "If something happens to her, the Boundary Field will go down, we'll have another media circus on our hands, and Saber forgot to bring her mask."

"But *where* is she?" Tails asked, "I don't think it's a good idea for her to be alone!"

Archer paused to shoot down another missile. "I had her hide in the nearby warehouse. She should be fine there!"

"I am *not* fine with this." Rin muttered.

After being forcibly relocated into the warehouse, Rin gone into what was know as The Funk. While intellectually, she knew that it was more pragmatic to avoid a direct confrontation and let everyone else handle the hard stuff. After all, the general tactic for Masters was to allow their Servants take the lead in battles, supporting only from a distance. That was how her father fought in the Fourth War (She assumed).

But huddling in some hidey-hole was not something she approved of. The fact that it was something *Shinji* would do only served to increase her irritation. And if there was one thing Tohsaka prided herself on, it was not being like Shinji. She had felt a presence leave the Boundary Field, which she assumed was the seaweed-headed twerp fleeing the battle like the coward he was. That alleviated her despondent attitude somewhat- while Shinji was clearing bailing,

Archer had *forced* Rin to go into hiding. However, the small guilt she felt, for being on the sidelines while her friends- *allies* , the mage within her whispered assertedly, they were only allies of convenience -fought with all of their might, did not diminish. Besides, it was a bit creepy listening to all of the explosions and not seeing what was causing them.

Rin then realized that her fists weren't shaking because of any guilt or anger. They were shaking because the floor was shaking!

The ground erupted, and Rin just barely jumped back in time to avoid being hit by the pieces. What looked like a gigantic drill was poking out of the bottom, and it rose, revealing that it was on top of some metal sphere with robotic legs, which clambered out of the hole like some sort of spider that evolved to mine instead spin webs. The drill split apart, manipulated by smaller arms. They spun around sphere, revealing that it was in fact a vehicle- driven by none other than Dr. Eggman!

"Heh heh heh...According to my sensors, the source of the the energy field is around here somewhere..." Eggman muttered, typing away at his console. "In fact..."

Eggman glanced up, and even from a distance Rin could see his eyes narrow underneath those glasses.

Uh-oh. It didn't take a genius to figure out where this was going. Rin's first instinct was to call for Archer. But Archer was the only one protecting the harbor from the submarine's missiles (Seriously, who put gun turrets and rocket launchers on a vehicle designed for underwater travel?!), if she called him in, however briefly, may be too long before another salvo was unleashed.

But more importantly...Rin wanted to face Eggman on her own. Her ancestors were control the land that would become Fuyuki. The Heaven's Feel was only allowed to take part because of their permission. And even after the city was built, it was still considered their territory, by the Mage's Association, if not by Japan's

government. And as the last of the Tohsakas (*Save one* , whispered a dark spot in her mind), Rin felt it was her responsibility to deal with any intruders that threatened it. And if she didn't do it herself...what kind of Mage would she be?

The dark spot in Rin's head raised its voice, pointing out that Eggman's vehicle was probably loaded with a plethora of futuristic weapons. Rin's pride as a mage, honed through years of training, countered with the rebuttal, so what, I've got Magecraft. Everyone knows that Magecraft trumps all.

But, the dark spot continued, what about the old reports of a someone killing Mages with guns-

Shut up! shouted the mage's pride, I'm about to be awesome!

During this mental debate, Eggman had pointed dramatically at Rin. "Unless my scanners are glitching- unlikely, given that they were made by the smartest being in the universe, IE, me- all of this energy is coming from *you!* " He declared, "You've got a Chaos, all right! hand it over!

"And what if I refuse?" Rin asked, reaching into her pouch. She fingered several gems, each loaded with a powerful spell. As far as she knew, mages weren't very commonplace in Sonic's world. It was possible that Eggman hadn't met one, even with his fancy-schmancy 'Magecraft radar'. If he believed that whatever was happening was due to the Emeralds, the better.

"Then I'll just take you with me," Eggman snarled, "And the passenger seat has a *very* tight harness!"

With speed and aim that would make the best in the Wild West green with envy, Rin pointed her finger at Eggman and fired a jewel loaded with a spell far more potent than *Gandre* . It was one of her more recent breakthroughs- combining the energy of the Power Rings with her own jewel Magecraft. One could argue (Like Archer had) that all Rin did was squeeze the gem into the Ring's hole, but

Rin knew that it took very precise calculations to make sure that the gem's power would not cause the whole array to self-destruct from the contrast of abilities; Decay and protection did not normally go hand in hand. But Rin had pulled it off- and now it was time to see how well it would work on the field.

The explosion was pretty phenomenal, as far as Rin was concerned. There was no comparing a normal Gem to one imbued with Power Ring energy. But when the smoke cleared, it was revealed that one of the drill pieces had shielded the madman! and worse, the blasted thing only looked badly burnt!

"That was a pretty good trick, but not good enough," Eggman half-growled, half gloated. "Now it's my turn. Get a load of this!"

The 'Egg Cracker' thundered forward, and under less dangerous circumstances would have looked comical. Its spider-legs stamping about reminded Rin of footage she had seen about the probe the Americans had sent to Mars. But she also saw that if she didn't move, she would be trampled underneath, and so Reinforced her legs. With her Mage Circuits coursing with energy, Rin leapt high into the air, kicked off of the wall, and shot across the warehouse over Eggman. Once she landed, she fired a regular *Gandre* at Eggman's head. While the drill shields weren't fast enough to block the Gem, the glass dome covering the doctor's cockpit was protection enough. All her attack did was get Eggman's attention.

"Aha! There you are!" Eggman shouted, and redirected the Egg Cracker at her. But rather than just charging, a port opened up on its front. There was a sound like a cannon being fired, and out from the port a small ball rocketed out. A ball with spikes. Rin had to jump to the side to avoid being hit, and kept jumping as Eggman fired more and more spike balls at her. But as she darted, one of the metal arms lunged forward and struck her dead-on. Rings fell from Rin's body as she was sent flying up into the air. Eggman's horrible laughter was mixed in with the sound of Rin hitting the floor, and she slid against the wall.

Grimacing, Rin struggled to get up. Though undamaged, she *felt* the metal hitting her side. And if her brief flight *hadn't* broken a rib, she would be very surprised. She saw Eggman's mechs stomp over to her, the light shining creepily off of Eggman's glasses.

"Now, I'd like to keep having fun, but I've got a schedule to keep," Eggman said, "Either you give me the Chaos Emerald, or I start searching!" To illustrate this threat, extra robot tentacles, with metal claws and clamps like the ones Arms had, but smaller, extended from the Egg Cracker.

Rin gritted her teeth, and refused to be intimidated. "I don't have your stupid Emerald, you perverted old geezer!" She shouted, and fired another Ring-Gem at Eggman. She missed his head, but managed to blast off one of the claws.

"Whoa!" Eggman yelled, ducking out of reflex. Poking his head up, he muttered, "Note to self, leave the auto-shield on...huh? Where'd she go?"

" *Orraaaa!* " Rin shouted, leaping up. Spinning in the air with all the grace and skill of a kung fu master, she spun a Reinforced leg with intent to kick off Eggman's bald head.

Sproing!

A *punching glove* on metal spring popped out and slammed into Rin's stomach. Rin felt the wind leave her, and she fell once more.

"Now, now!" The doctor chortled nastily, "Didn't you watch all of those PSAs on the danger of pretending to be Sonic?"

Dammit...dammit! Rin thought bitterly, punching the ground. She had never felt so humiliated before in her entire life.

For the past ten years, she had trained herself rigorously. She honed her Magecraft to the finest imaginable, preparing and empowering the highest-grade gems. Practiced martial arts with techniques

impossible to finish without Reinforcing her body. And while she knew that it would be impossible for a mortal being to combat a Servant, that was why she summoned Archer. However, for all other dangers, she had felt that her abilities could handle anything.

But now, when she needed it the most, when it was time to solve the crumbling situation, her Magecraft failed her. Everything she had been taught to believe in...useless. She had been outdone, by cold machines... *again*.

Bitterly, she looked down at her floor. Her eyes focused on the Command Seals on the back of her hand. Gritting her teeth, she began to focus. The marks started to glow.

"What now?" Eggman grunted, before a massive flash of light filled the room.

When the shine faded, a tall, dark and handsome stranger stood between the evil scientist and the damsel in distress.

"Here I come, to save the day." Said Archer.

To be Continued

Tiger Dojo

Taiga: Down the winding hills and across the vast plains, Tiger Dojo has arrived! I am your instructor, Fujimura Taiga!

Illya: The Number 1 Student, presenting!

Taiga: What a long chapter this was! The author was originally going to make this the final chapter in the arc, but it was going so long that he decided to cut it here and complete the introduction arc in the next chapter.

Illya: What a lazy author.

Taiga: Silence!

(Whack!)

Illya: *Gah!* The damned *Tora-shina!* Let...let's just answer the questions!

Taiga: The first comes from Madonna- *hime!* She asks, "Where did Eggman get the animals for all of those robots?"

Illya: Eggman's been catching cute lil' critters from all over Japan. I even caught some robots wandering onto castle grounds, today. That's why I didn't show up at the harbor.

Taiga: This one is from ENDDRAGON369, "Can you PLEASE Sonic wield Caliburn (Excalibur)?" Hmm, I don't know...Saber isn't the kind of person to let anyone else have her sword...If Shirou masters Projection, he might be generous...

Illya: And our last question is from Neo-Devil: "I swear to god that Avenger gives me a similar vibe to Mephiles...is he Mephiles, or is he Angra Mainyu?"

Taiga: That's hard to say, the Author never played the 2006 *Sonic The Hedgehog* , so it'd be hard to make a comparison to our Avenger.

Illya: It's best to think Avenger as a mix between the Holy Grail that papa spoke to in *Fate/Zero*, and the Avenger that showed up in *Fate/Hollow Ataraxia* .

Taiga: That brings us to the end of this session! I will see you at the next practice!

Illya: Goodbye, everyone!

Fly In The Freedom

Chapter 9: *Fly In The Freedom*

Archer stared down Dr. Eggman. Behind him, on her hands and knees, was Rin. He didn't have to turn around to see the chagrined expression on her face. He knew that the only time Rin would use a Command Seal to summon him would be if she gotten into a situation she couldn't spell cast or argue out of. And the only way someone as headstrong as Rin would realize she was in over her head would be a total defeat. He glanced behind back to confirm that, yes, Rin definitely looked chagrined.

"Rin, you should have contacted me the minute Eggman showed up," Archer chided softly, "That was the reason we camped out here."

"Where the heck did *you* come from!?" Eggman demanded, "What was that, Chaos Control?"

"Sure, I'm going to explain how all of my cool powers work," Archer said sarcastically, "That works out all the time in *anime* ."

Eggman snarled, and the drill-bits on the Eggm Cracker lunged at Archer. Instead of running or even fighting back, the bowman just held out his hand.

" *Rio Aias* ."

The air before Archer shimmered, and a light shaped like a flower in full bloom appeared, followed by an transparent shield in front of it. The drill-bits collided with the shield, hammering it endlessly and without any effect.

"Gah! What is that, a magic forcefield?!" Eggman shouted, frustrated.

"Kinda," Archer replied, thinking, *Judging from the rate those arms strike, not to mention the pattern, the ideal moment to fight back should be...*

Archer Projected Kanshou and Bakuya, and let the shield vanish. Seeing what appeared to be an opening, Eggman pressed his attack. Rather than use the drill bits, he fired his spikeball cannon. As Archer batted the balls away, the drill-bits shot forward. Having anticipated this, Archer was all ready to slice each drill piece off.

"Fair warning," Archer said, "The Bug Queen couldn't fight to her fullest because she wanted to prevent civilian casualties. Here, though..."

Archer's arms became blurs and the Egg Cracker's drills fell to the ground. Eggman made a noise of shock and surprise at what had happened. The doctor pulled at his yoke to direct the Egg Cracker away, but Archer was already on the move for his follow-up assault. He charged at the Egg Cracker, shifting his footing just enough to avoid the spring-loaded punching glove. As the comical bludgeon harmlessly passed by his head, Archer whipped out his swords and sliced the legs of the Egg Cracker to pieces. The pod fell to the ground with a crash, ending up lopsided.

Eggman looked about frantically. "Wha- How did you!?"

"Sonic's a bit too careless," Was Archer's explanation. "He doesn't have an eye for weaknesses like I do."

Archer strode over to Eggman's cockpit, and held up his swords. The mad doctor's eyes widened when he realized just what the white-haired man was planning.

"Whoa! Hold on, there!" Eggman shouted, "Aren't you going to take me to jail?! That's what you heroic-types do, don't you?"

"Sorry, you must have me confused for someone else," Archer said coldly, "I stopped playing nice years ago."

Eggman gritted his teeth, and flipped a switch. All over the warehouse, the spike balls strewn about by the battle began to explode. For a brief moment, Archer's ironclad control slipped as he tried to figure out if the Badniks were attacking or this was some trick of Eggman.

And in battle, a brief moment is all it takes to decide the outcome.

"Yo! Where'd Archer go?!" Sonic yelled, speeding up the Shirou. "He just vanished!"

Shirou felt a cold feeling in his gut. "Archer's not someone who retreats. If he disappeared, something must have happened to Rin!"

Sonic's quills went stiff. "Wait, where is Rin? I haven't seen her..."

"Guys!" Tails landed next to Sonic and Shirou and pointed. "Check out that warehouse!"

With the Badnik horde thinning, the three heroes could hear the sounds of multiple blasts going off from within the building. A piece of the roof exploded, and something flew out from the smoke. Shirou's heart leapt into his throat when he saw what it was. Dr. Eggman's Egg Mobile, and it had an reluctant passenger; Rin, held to the side by a robotic tentacle!

Meanwhile, Saber was unaware of any of this. She had abandoned the battle on the dock to tackle the enemy head-on. Running across the sea with the Lady of the Lake's blessing, she gathered her Prana, preparing to eliminate the Egg Marine. Before she could get within minimum required distance to use her Noble Phantasm, the ocean began to rock. The submarine was rising out of the water!

It can fly too!? The blond Servant thought, half-shocked and half-amazed.

Archer leapt out of warehouse, and Projected a bow and sword to fire from it. As he aimed, he realized that even if he shot down Eggman, there was no guarantee that he would be able to save Rin from falling into the churning water.

Sonic elbowed Tails and jerked a thumb towards the city. "Let's get the *Tornado* !"

Tails nodded. "Right!"

Sonic took hold of Tails by the hand and raced off. Shirou made to follow them, but he could only take two steps before the off-worlders were out of sight. Distraught, the ginger Mage turned back to the ocean to command Saber, but saw that his Servant was already a dot on the horizon, chasing after the now-airborn submarine. Archer landed besides him, and the two men were then in full-emotional sync; Each hating himself for his inability to save someone. For Archer, the pain and self-fury was doubly so.

I spent years honing my Magecraft, became a Counter Guardian, made a slave to the will of the World...and I'm still the wannabe hero stuck on the sidelines! Archer thought, the gritting of his teeth the only sign of his emotions.

Shirou was far less reserved. Falling down onto his knees, the young man angrily punched the pavement. Looking at the sky, he let out an anguished scream.

Sakura wanted to scream. She wanted to cry. She wanted to let her feelings loose onto the world. But she wouldn't. She couldn't. She dared not to. After everything that was happening, she feared it would simply draw more and more to her.

It began not long ago. While out on an errand for Shirou (She knew that he would be busy with the Holy Grail War), Sakura felt a slight tremor on her body. She instantly knew what it was.

Her Command Seals, her link to Rider, returning.

For Sakura, this was the worst feeling ever in a long line of worst feelings. Not only would she have to cope with the terrible nightmares that plagued her sleep, or the unsettling tingling that began to occur recently, the 16-year-old now had to fight in the Holy Grail War- against both her sister and her *senpai*! She had given control of Rider to Shinji in the hopes of avoiding such a confrontation, but it appeared that her 'brother' was incapable of retaining that obedience...or, just as likely, their grandfather decided Rider was better off with her original Master.

And so there Sakura was, standing in an alley, shivering like it was the coldest day in winter. She was frozen, paralyzed with fear. Her mind was no longer in the present. It was back at that day before the Great Fire...

Uncle Kariya, lying there on the stairs, dead...

"...hey! *Hey!* Are you listening!?"

The voice shook Sakura out of her thoughts. Looking around, her gaze was drawn deeper into the alley.

There, his head sticking out of a dumpster, was another *tanuki*. Unlike the creature hiding at Shirou's house, this one was red, with spikes dropping down around his head. There were spikes coming out of his mittens.

"I...I'm sorry, did you say something?" Sakura asked, her mind in something of a daze. The lack of sleep, combined with her worry, had put her out of sorts.

Knuckles sighed, and climbed out of the dumpster. "*I said*, have you found any jewels, like this one here?" He held up a scrap of paper with a crude drawing of a gem.

Sakura shook her head. She remembered hearing Dr. Eggman demand an emerald of some kind back when he attacked the school...were the *tanukis* looking for them as well?

Knuckles narrowed his eyes. "You sure about that?" He had sensed a strange power about the girl, which was why he confronted her. But at the same time, it didn't seem like she was lying.

Sakura suddenly realized something. Everything that had happened recently, it had all began when the *tanukis* had appeared.

Including Avenger.

"I'm sure, but..." Sakura gathered her meager amounts of strength. If the *tanuki* got violent, she could always summon Rider, but that was a small consolation. "What is the Chaos Emerald?"

Knuckles blinked, and folded the paper and stuck it in his glove. He then resumed his suspicious glare, which nearly caused Sakura to faint.

But she wouldn't. So much was happening, she had to get answers. Where did Zouken's plots begin, and how were the *tanukis* tied into it?

Knuckles sighed. Crossing his arms, he said, "Listen, the Chaos Emeralds are the most powerful objects in the entire universe. If you get all seven, it's possible to create miracles..."

The Echidna already had Sakura's attention, but his words had caused her to become entirely focused on their conversation. Seven? Miracles? It sounded so familiar to a child of the Holy War's Founding Families. Everything else faded away as Sakura poured every ounce of her being into taking in Knuckles. So much that she didn't realize...

...That there were *two* eavesdroppers on their conversation.

Up on the rooftop, Rider turned and leapt away. While she had wanted to greet Sakura immediately, she couldn't take the chance of anyone figuring out their connection. And that connection was in danger. Ever since their bond had been restored, Rider could feel that something had disrupted her Master's flow of Prana. She couldn't just heedlessly absorb Sakura's Mana. She had to find a way to give some back. The most obvious solution would be to continue to stealing Mana from civilians, but Rider had a feeling that Sakura would not approve. But, if these Chaos Emeralds were on par with the Holy Grail's power, at least *one* of them could supply Rider with the Prana she needed to fight.

&BReak&

Somewhere underneath the city, Avenger smiled. Although there was no one to see it, it was a terrible sight. All around him... *things* pulsed, several dozen new organisms that shared a single mind. Or soul. And they trembled as the self-proclaimed Servant worked the muscles necessary to twist his facial features into that expression.

A miracle, huh...?

Deep within, the Chaos Emerald throbbed.

"...So, she's not here?" Mr. Stuart asked innocently.

Souichirou Kazuki nodded. As usual, the man's expression was unreadable. Even a rock that looked like a face would be easier to gauge. "Yes. She went out to do a few errands. Preparations for our wedding."

Stuart nodded, pretending to care. "I imagine a lot of things will need to be done. So, are you going to do a western-style ceremony?"

After arriving, Stuart learned that Issei was not at the temple. That said, the special agent had no intention of letting his trip go to waste.

After talking a bit with that strange man at the gate (What kind of name was Asassin? Was he connected to Emiya's companion, Saber?), he entered the temple grounds ostensibly to visit Kazuki. The truth of the matter was that he intended to plant a few listening devices. The fact that the rest of the monks had been sent away not long after the various murders and other incidents began was too suspicious. Unfortunately Kazuki had been there, and Stuart had to feign an interest in the temple's layout and structure. As they talked, Stuart made numerous attempts to discern the identity, the basic appearance, *anything* about of the stoic man's mysterious fiancée. However, Kazuki was a former assassin (Though unproven this little fact was), and very good at answering questions without revealing any information. Combined with his near-inability to display any emotion, it took all of Stuart's self-control not to rip out his own hair.

And he *still* hadn't been able to plant a bug!

"We may not go through with an actual ceremony," Kazuki commented, "Neither one of us have any family members still alive."

"Oh, that's a shame," Stuart said, "Wait...if you're not going to have a wedding ceremony, what kind of preparations need to be done?"

Kazuki then looked away. "That's for...things that require no audience."

Stuart had to squint, but he could just barely seen a smidgeon of red appearing on a cheek. With a start, he realized that the impossible was happening; Souichirou Kazuki was blushing! And with that tidbit, Stuart's brain made another connection. And that caused a far less subtle blush to appear on his face. Now the all special agent really wanted was an excuse to escape this conversation, or a legitimate means of changing the subject.

Stuart got his wish when his cell phone rang. The caller ID told Stuart that it was from headquarters. Bowing his head, the blond said, "I'm sorry, Kazuki- *san* , but I need to take this. It's from someone that I've trying to get in touch with all day."

Kazuki shrugged. "That is all right. Go talk with your friend."

Stuart half-ran away from the shrine, nearly tripping over Asassin as he hurried past the gate and down the stairs. He was in such a rush that he didn't notice that something had fallen out of his jacket pocket.

Once he felt he was far enough, Stuart answered his phone. "What's going on?"

"There's been some kind of massacre at the harbor! The area is littered with robot parts and the security is missing!" Pierceman's voice hissed through the speaker.

"What?! Is there anybody there?" Stuart asked.

"No. Our field agents claimed to have seen Emiya Shirou running away from the area, but it hasn't been confirmed if he was actually there."

"What happened to Saber? Wasn't she supposed to be with him?"

"She's missing too. There's something else."

"Now what?"

"We've picked up some intel from the Air Defense Force; they've got two UFOs leaving Japan. One is some kind of, I dunno, a airship that's shaped like a submarine."

A flying sub?

"The other is that fox-boy's plane they spotted the other day. And Sonic is with him! What should we do?"

Stuart slowed down. Forcing his heart rate to calm down as well, he leaned against a lamp post. He thought for a moment. Then he said, "Right now, we can't do anything about the flying sub or the plane."

Try to get as much data as you can from the left-over robots. Keep monitoring everything that's happening in the city.

"And hope we catch a break."

High the air, the *Tornado* flew. Stationed impeccably on the wings was Sonic. The Hedgehog shielded his eyes with his hand as he glared at the horizon. He glanced back at Tails.

"So, not to sound like a little kid on a car ride, but how much further?" Sonic asked his sidekick and pilot. "Are we even going the right way?"

"I've been tapping into calls between the nation's air defense and scanning the area with the Miles Electric," Tails replied, "According to their data and ours, we should be seeing Eggman's sub...ship... thingy any minute," There was a beep. "Wait, there's a huge energy signature right now!"

Sonic looked about. He didn't see anything. Grasping the edge of the wings, he pointed his gaze downward. Very faintly, he could see a dot that was both yellow and blue. Or, mostly blue topped off with yellow.

"It's Saber!" Sonic exclaimed, "Quick, bring us down!"

Tails did so. However, they had only descended a few meters down when Saber shot up and grabbed hold of the landing gear. With a flip that would make an Olympic gymnast green with envy, she flipped herself onto the *Tornado's* wings, joining Sonic.

"Did you run out here all on your own, Saber?" Tails asked, amazed.

"During my lifetime, I was given a blessing," Saber explained, "This gift allows me to walk the waters as if they were the land itself," She gave Sonic a slight smile. "Besides, haven't you then the same thing? Or were you just exaggerating that time?"

" I run so fast that I don't give my feet time to sink," Sonic replied, " You were basically jogging. Still, pretty useful, as superpowers go. Not very flashy, but, eh. Can you also turn water into wine?"

Saber was about launch a scathing reply about Christianity when a beeping from the *Tornado* 's on-board computer cut into her dialogue. The three heroes looked up and saw Dr. Eggman's flying submarine. On it's side, they could see the words Flying Torpedo printed in giant letters.

"There it is!" Sonic commented, "Think we're coming up on their radar? Or maybe we can take Eggman by surprise?"

Sonic got his answer when the Flying Torpedo unleashed a fleet of flying Badniks. They bore down on the *Tornado* , but were handily dispatched by Sonic and Saber.

"Yeah, dunno why I asked," Sonic replied, "Tails! Let's go give Eggman a welcome present of our own! Bring us in!"

"That's gonna be harder than we thought, Sonic," Tails admitted, "I can't do the usual routine with *two* people on the wings! And if we don't get to the *Flying Torpedo* soon, the *Tornado* won't have enough power to make it back to Fuyuki!"

Saber thought about their situation. While her honor as a knight (And perhaps a small amount of pride and desire to personally storm the enemy's base) compelled her to attack her world's invader head-on and defeat him with her own sword, she recalled her life as a king. A leader was more than someone who rode in front of the charge. A leader had to be someone who could assess the problem and come up with the best solution. Saber considered everything she had learned about the other-worlders, and compared that with her own abilities. She came up with a plan and shared it.

"That sounds pretty awesome," Tails conceded, "But do you really think you can make the shot?"

Saber's face was the very epitome of kingliness; No arrogance, no finality, just confidence and the determination to do the duty. "Try me."

"Hey, I'm game, sounds like fun!" Sonic grinned, and hopped into the air.

Saber held up one arm and caught Sonic's curled-up body in her hand. She pulled back and summoned her reserves of Prana. Thanks to the Power Rings Shirou had gathered, the lady knight had plenty of stamina for this feat.

"Okay, hold on until I say so..." Sonic cautioned. "Wait...wait...wait... *now!* "

" *Prana Burst!* " Everything she had went into her arms. Saber hurled Sonic forward and upward, a spinning blue cannon ball shot from the most powerful of siege weapons. Normally, one would need to aim a little higher in order to account for their projectile's eventual descent. But for Sonic, there was no arc- His speed and Saber's power combined to ensure that. instead, it was all one straight line. And at the end of it was Eggman.

Rin made another attempt to break the glass. All she did was hurt her foot a bit.

After boarding the Flying Torpedo, Dr. Eggman quickly deposited his captive in a special holding pen. It was essentially four giant, metal prongs surrounding her, with glass all around. Capping the cage was a giant metal disc, underneath and pointing at her were a collection of spotlights. They were currently off, but when the lights were on, Rin had felt her strength- all of the Prana she had saved up -leave her. Siphoned away. It was clearly a device designed to drain the Mana of its target, much like a Servant could. Such a thing would have been impossible to do without Magecraft. But in Sonic's world, she was forced to acknowledge, the distance between conventional

science and Magecraft was a lot closer than she was comfortable with.

Dr. Eggman grinned nastily as he watched Rin rub her leg. "I wouldn't do that, if I were you. You might smudge the glass," He reached into his pocket and pulled out Rin's bag of Gems. He fingered a *Gandre* . "I have more than a few questions about you... starting with how you made *these* ," An alert sounded. " *Now what?*"

Eggman stomped over to a computer terminal. The screen showed large hole in the hull. Frowning, Eggman had the security footage play back in slow motion. Then, super slow-mo. Finally, at slow-motion x5. He managed to retrieve an image of a very familiar blue and spiky figure flashing the camera the peace sign.

Eggman slapped his forehead in frustration. "I don't even know why I asked," He pointed at Rin. "I'll deal with you later! Right now, I've got a Hedgehog to catch!"

Eggman ran over to an elevator. In a minute, the doors shut and hissed as he left the floor. With the doctor no longer around to gloat and distract, Rin's mind was free, even if her body wasn't. She was tempted, sorely tempted, to use her Command Seal to summon Archer and have him free her...but there was no telling what would happen if Eggman's... *magecraft* drainer kicked in while she invoked the Seal's power. And it had already drained her Circuits before hand. Giving it a reason to take more would be risky...and perhaps fatal. And even if she could break free, she had no idea where she was in the ship. As much as Rin hated to admit it, right now the best thing was to wait until a better opportunity came around. She took a deep breath, and straightened herself.

Always be composed and graceful... Rin reminded herself, *That is the Tohsaka way. If I keep my head level, I'll find an ideal solution to this mess.*

For Sonic, it was business as usual. He had broken into so many of Eggman's bases and battleships that even not knowing where Rin was being bothered him. It was just a minor problem that would solve itself.

...Okay, in truth, the reason he wasn't worried about finding Rin because he was more concerned with keeping his balance while doing a rail grind with nothing but the sky and ocean waiting if he fell.

Okay, why does Eggman put so many pitfalls in his stuff? Sonic thought as he reached the other side. Hopping off, he dodged an Orbinaut's spike balls and smashed it to pieces. Does he just run out of building materials, or something?

Now back on solid ground, Sonic continued his high-velocity exploration. He ran up walls, ducked into crevices when needed (Mostly to wipe some oil off of his shoes), and continued to smash away at any robots that crossed his path. Stopping at one point to wipe some more oil off, an idea occurred to him.

Activating his communicator, Sonic said into the receiver, "Rin? Rin, are you there? Do you copy?"

For a few minutes, Sonic didn't get any response. Then, he heard, "... ate this stupid thing, I can never be sure when it's on...!"

"Oh, cool!" Sonic grinned, nonplussed by Rin's technology-induced aggravation. "Don't hang up, I'm gonna see if I can use the GPS in our comms to find your location."

Sonic entered a few more commands. The little screen flashed red, and the words ERROR appeared.

"...Yeah, this is gonna take a bit longer than I thought," He admitted, "Just hang tight, and if you manage to bust yourself out of where Eggman stuck you, try and follow your comm's GPS to meet up with me."

Without bothering to wait for a reply, Sonic shot down a hall, dodging claws and blasts from robots. He reached a shaft leading upwards. Rather than waiting for an elevator, he began to parkour up the shaft. After going an estimated three stories, Sonic ducked into an open air vent. He built up a Spin Dash and shot down the vent's path, smashing a van to pieces and coming out into a large area with a staircase. Looking up, Sonic spotted a sign pointing upwards labeled "Restrooms"

Hmm, where there's toilets, there's people! He thought, began to run up, and then stopped. *Wait, Eggman's never been that nice to prisoners.*

Turning on his heels, Sonic hopped onto the stair railing and began his slid towards the bottom.

When Rin realized that her hi-tech cage didn't have a toilet, or access to a bathroom, her haste to escape confinement hastened. Luckily, she had one trump card left at her disposal. While Eggman had taken her bag of Gems, she had one extra stored in her shoe, just in case. A quick check revealed that the capsule's Prana-drain hadn't effected it (A lead-lined secret pocket really was a good investment) too much, but she would have to move quickly. Her plan was to use the Gem to break the drainer, then shatter the glass container with her Reinforced martial arts before Eggman or a robot showed up to either fix it or recapture her. Personally, she hoped she would run into Eggman again. She *really* wanted another shot at taking him down.

Rin focused her thoughts. She had to build up as much of her own Prana if this was going to work. But she couldn't be too obvious and activate the drainer's functions. She heard a familiar hum and knew that it was time. She pointed directly upwards.

" *Gandre!* "

Like a bullet from pistol, the jewel went from Rin's fingertip to the center of the drainer. There were sparks and a small explosion as the curse hit. Knowing that she only had a short time until someone came a guard came around. She activated her Mage Circuits (Never had such a routine process felt so *good* until that point!), and swung her leg out. She was pleased to feel the wind as her Magecraft accelerated the speed.

Crack!

She *wasn't* pleased to feel her hell make contact with the glass. Despite putting a being allowed to access her Magecraft uninhibited, Rin had failed to break the container's walls. The most she had accomplished was causing a vary long hairline crack.

Still, it *was* more than anything she had done beforehand. Before Rin could take another crack at the crack, she heard a door open up behind her. Turning around, she saw Sonic zip into the room.

"And once again, mindlessly running around solves all of my problems!" The Hedgehog declared, before turning his attention. "Hey, Rin, how're you doing? Eggman treating you right?"

Rin turned away, a little annoyed, but trying not to show it. "I'm fine. The old geezer ran off for some reason."

"Yeah, 'for some reason'," Sonic grinned, "I bet Eggman's not gonna let us jump ship without a fight! Speaking of which...stand back!"

Rin barely had time to react when Sonic shot at her. Or rather, at her container. In a second, the floor was littered with pieces of glass. Landing back on the floor, Sonic brushed his fur and causally swept some of the tiny shards aside with his foot.

"Personally, I think the damsel in distress bit doesn't suit you." Sonic said conversely.

"How nice of you to say so," Rin replied. So far, it didn't seem like Sonic was going to make fun of her. Apparently even showboaters like him had some manners. "Where did Tails land that plane?"

Sonic laughed, "Land? We weren't even in jumping range! Saber chucked me here."

Rin blinked. "Then what are we going to do?" She rubbed her chin in thought. *So, they brought Saber...that's a relief.* "I suppose we can find a safe place until Tails gets here..."

"Nah, that'll take too long," Sonic grabbed Rin by the hand. "We just need to find a good spot to jump ship and he'll catch us."

" *WHAT!?* "

Rin was so stunned by Sonic's casual admittance to such a daredevil, life-threatening, and overall *stupid* plan that she didn't resist when Sonic began to pull. And in the 1.4 seconds it took for her brain to reboot, he was already pulling her out and they were going down an elevator shaft. *By running along the wall.*

With little regard as to where they going and what was happening, Sonic led Rin down a harrowing series of halls, chambers, and storage facilities. All of them had robots, which proved to be of little consequence. Sonic had to put Rin down so he could fight without endangering her even more so, and the Tohsaka Master took out her frustrations with everything on the Badniks. But the minute a room was clear of enemies, Sonic would scoop her up again and resumed running. Though she wisely choose not kick or struggle out of his arms, Rin made her displeasure with this chivalry well known.

"You don't have to carry me!" She yelled as Sonic rocketed over some pipes. "I can move on my own!"

"As fast as me?" Sonic asked rhetorically. He already knew the answer to that.

"Do you even know where we're going?" Rin demanded.

Sonic shrugged. "Eh, I figure if we just keep going forward and not in circles, we'll find a way out. Loop!"

Before Rin could ask what Sonic meant, their path began to curve. Upwards. Rin gasped, clung to Sonic, and did her very best not to let the contents of her stomach jump ship as well. Though successful, it took several minutes after they were back on the floor for her complexion remove the viridian hue it had taken.

"Why..." Rin moaned, "Why would he put in a loop-de-loop?"

"Mystery of the universe." Sonic replied, grinning from the adrenaline.

As they continued on, the ship suddenly shook as if something heavy from the outside struck it. Sonic's communicator suddenly beeped, and although it wasn't his style, the Hedgehog stopped to put Rin down to respond. Tails' voice began to speak from it.

" *Sonic! Have you found Rin yet?!* " The fox sounded a little frantic.

"She's right here," Sonic held his wrist up to Rin. "Say 'Hi', Rin."

"Tails, what's going on?" Rin asked, "We heard something hit the ship."

" *We've got bogies! And not the ones Eggman made!* "

"What, you mean the air force caught up with us?" Sonic asked, taking his wrist back.

" *Yes! There are jets trying to shoot the Flying Torpedo down!* "

"Have they gone after you?"

" *No, the jets are focused on the airship. They've avoided Eggman's return-fire so far, but Saber and I can't protect them without doing*

something that could expose Magecraft.

Sonic nodded, his expression becoming more serious. "Got it. See if you can tell them to break off their attack. I doubt they've got anything that could do any damage," He glanced up at Rin. "No offense."

Rin sniffed, her way of assuring that no offense had been taken.

" Roger. I'll get under the airship to catch you. Just give me a heads-up when you get ready to bail. Over and out! "

The jets soared around the *Flying Torpedo* , trying to take potshots while dodging missiles and missile-like robots. There were only four planes, but reinforcements were already on the way. The air was full of tension, adrenaline, and this radio chatter.

" This is Falcon-1 to base. We have located the UFO and are engaging. Sending our coordinates, over! "

" Falcon-2 here. Falcon-1, what about the red bi-plane following? Over. "

" We have orders not to concern ourselves with the bi-plane, Falcon 2, over. "

" It's just...it looks like it's being flown by a kitsune, and there's this girl standing on the wings... "

" Let it be, Falcon-2. Over. "

" This is Falcon-3, the UFO is releasing bogies, over! "

" Falcon-3, this is Falcon-2, what do you- Are those turtles?! "

" Falcon-4 here! The target has missile-launchers on both starboard and port! "

" *Helloooo? Is this the right frequency?* "

Captain Reiji looked suddenly at his radio. That sounded like a child!
" *Who the hell is this!?*" Reiji's eyes slowly turned outside his cockpit. They were directed towards the red biplane. " *Are you...is this the biplane?!* "

" *That's right!* " Reiji could almost imagine an eager face nodding. " *You can call me Tails. Listen, you have to withdraw! Eggman's only getting started! And even if you could take fight him, you might end up hurting...uh, someone.* "

" *That's the point!* " Falcon-3 half-shouted, " *We're trying to hurt him!* "

" *No, that's not my point!* " Tails retorted, " *Eggman's kidnapped a girl! I don't who she is, but Sonic's on-board the Flying Torpedo rescuing her!* "

" *What!?* "

" *Hey...isn't Sonic that tanuki that helped the Bug Queen save the school a few days ago?* " Falcon-2 asked.

" *He's a hedgehog. And yes!* "

" *...Your orders, Falcon-1?* " That was Falcon-4.

Reiji gritted his teeth. This was absolutely inane. It felt like real-life had been supplanted by one of his kids' *anime* . That said, his older daughter had sent an email about being saved by *kitsune* . As much as his training told him otherwise, Reiji had a gut feeling that 'Tails' was being legitimate. However, they couldn't let a chance to take down a dangerous terrorist slip away. All attempts to locate Eggman's base so far had failed. The airship was the best lead they had. And so, he made a compromise.

" Tails... san , we're giving your friend Sonic five minutes to rescue the hostage, " Capt. Reiji radioed back, " That's the ETA we have for reinforcements. During that time, Falcon-2 through 4, I want you to focus on taking down those bogies and the turrets. Do you copy? "

" Copy that, over! " Three voices Reiji recognized replied. There was also a fourth voice that Reiji had never heard before this day.

" Thank you, sir. And don't worry, five minutes is plenty of time for Sonic, " Tails replied, " He should be out of there in half of that! "

He sounds pretty confident...wish I had something to feel confident about! Reiji thought.

By that time, Sonic and taken Rin to a large hanger bay. At least, Rin assumed it was a hanger bay. However, there were no vehicles of any kind in sight. It was just a large, empty chamber with enough space to fit several jets.

"I don't like this," Rin said, "Why isn't there anything here?"

"Easy," Sonic said, setting Rin down. "This is where Eggman's gonna sick a giant robot on us."

"What?"

"Or, he's gonna take us on himself," Sonic continued nonchalantly, "Trust me, I've done this song and dance before. Empty room always means a big fight's coming."

"You're very laid-back for someone who's expecting a battle." Rin noted. Even the calm of Saber or Archer was laced with an edge. Sonic looked like he was about to take a walk on the beach.

"First rule of adventures," Sonic said, "Always keep a level head."

"I see," Rin looked around the area. The stillness was getting to her. "So, what should we expect?"

Sonic grinned, "That's the second rule; Don't expect anything. Just learn to roll with it."

Before Rin could further question Sonic, a horrible laughter filled the room. It was Eggman. Lights that were once dimmed turned to full brightness, and Rin could see Dr. Eggman, piloting that accursed Egg Cracker that had humiliated her back in Fuyuki. Behind him, however, was a new threat. A giant robot, easily twice the Egg Cracker's size was there. Looking at it, Rin was vaguely reminded of a pig's head. On its left and right were gigantic wheels, like the kind used by monster trucks seen on insipid TV shows. (Rin only later made the comparison was after relating her experience to Archer. She had never seen a monster truck rally before) The two holes in the "snout" glowed ominously. On its back, a pair of giant exhaust pipes puffed smog as an engine within revved up.

E-6791: *Skweel*

Sonic grinned. "Gee, Eggman. With those jets buzzing this ship, I didn't think you'd have time to see us off! What a sweet guy."

"Hah!" Eggman snorted derisively, "If the standard military of our couldn't stop me, there's no way the sub-standard military of this world could!"

As a Mage, Rin had no problem with Eggman's demeaning the level of her country's technological development. But as a citizen of Japan, she felt that she had a duty to defend her nation's honor. To compromise between these two mentalities, Rin's frown deepened and she clenched her fist. Stepping closer to Sonic, she whispered, "Be careful, Sonic. Eggman's weird machine has some kind of punching device if you get too close, hidden in a compartment at the front."

Sonic nodded, and whispered back, "Thanks for the tip," Louder, he said to Eggman, "I'd love to stay here and shoot the breeze with ya, Eggers, but I've gotta get the little lady home. Her parents don't like it when she's out too late, you understand."

"Goodness, I had no idea I was being so thoughtless!" Eggman gasped with mock-worry. Sneering, he pointed at the two. "Run 'em down, Skweel!"

The pig-robot's giant tires screeched against the floor as Skweel charged at Sonic and Rin. The Sonic rushed towards Skweel, but easily hopped over him to go at Eggman. Rin, Reinforcing her body, leapt to the side to avoid being run down. Meanwhile, Eggman attempted to crush Sonic with the Egg Cracker's drill-bits, but the Hedgehog dodged the attack and hit the vehicle with a Homing Shot. Yelling in alarm, Eggman shot both a glare and several spike balls at Sonic- and missed. Sonic effortlessly ducked and weaved around the shots, and the spike balls either landed harmlessly on the floor or imbedded themselves in the wall.

"Hey! Would it help if I put a bullseye on my tummy?" Sonic taunted, giving one spike ball a sidelong glance.

"Don't get near those things, Sonic!" Rin yelled as she dodged another charge from Skweel. "They explode!"

"They do?" Sonic eyes widened slightly and he put some distance between himself and the spike balls. "Thanks for the heads-up!"

As Sonic hopped back, he heard a screech of tires and realized that Skweel was making an attempt to run him over. He jumped into the air as Skweel roared under him, then landed a Homing Shot on the robot's back. Rather than acting hurt, Skweel whirled about in a desperate attempt to counterattack, but Sonic nimbly bounced away.

Rin, meanwhile, kept her distance from both robot and mad scientist. This was something she and Sonic had discussed during their brief journey through the airship. If and when the two of them would run

into either Eggman or one of his sub-bosses (And Sonic was pretty insistent that it would happen), the key to victory was patience. Despite his eagerness to rush into danger, Sonic made it clear that blindly charging at an enemy would be suicidal; the best tactic was to wait for an opening, *then* charge in. As Rin ducked, weaved, and leapt away from Eggman's weapons and Skweel's rushes, she realized that this strategy worked best for Sonic, whose reaction time was superior to even Lancer. He could be on the other side of the room and make it in time to capitalize on a moment of weakness. Rin, on the other, was still human, even with Reinforcement enhancing her abilities. And the one time she was able to land a hit on Skweel, there seemed to be no effect. It was so frustrating! How could she tell if it was damaged if it didn't have any mana? Sonic had assured her that if they just kept at it, the damage would take effect soon enough, but Rin wasn't too confident with that.

There has to be something more I can do! Rin thought furiously, *Running around and randomly hitting things are for...neanderthals!*

Luckily, and perhaps insulting, neither Eggman nor Skweel were particularly keen on keeping track of Rin. If she wanted to be generous, Rin would believe that it was due to Eggman's longstanding grudge against Sonic that compelled him to target the Hedgehog. It was better than the assumption that, having already defeated her previously, Eggman decided Rin was not worth his effort.

At one point, Sonic seemed to be cornered by both Eggman and Skweel. As the two enemies closed in, Sonic ran *up* the wall, and once he was high enough, shot over Eggman's head. Once he was down on the other side, he took the chance to Homing Shot the Egg Cracker again.

"Argh!" Eggman exclaimed as his cockpit was jostled. He turned the craft around and began to fire spike balls. "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!"

Crap! Those stupid bombs! Rin thought, dodging the projectiles. Inspiration then struck. *Wait...bombs! What if I...?*

With a look of determination that would have impressed Shirou, Rin began to run towards the nearest bomb. As she did, she began to focus all of Mage Circuits in her leg.

The bombs were on timers, but they also could be detonated remotely. Luckily, Eggman was more focused on Sonic than her. Furthermore, they were clearly designed not to explode on impact, as none detonated after slamming to walls.

With that in mind, Rin swept her leg out at the spike ball, and in a move that would have made high school soccer captains the world over green with envy, *kicked it!* The spike ball soared across the and slammed into Skweel's left wheel. This had numerous effects; One, impact of the bomb disrupted the robot's path, nearly knocking it off on its side. That's when the bomb went off. While the spike ball was designed to resist the force of most impacts, Rin's kick had jammed the circuitry, causing it to explode preemptively. The force of the blast was enough to completely knock Skweel on its side, and the porcine robot spun around aimlessly in a like, making whining noises that sounded very similar to a certain breed of farm livestock.

Sonic laughed, "Nice one, Rin! You play soccer, or are you just on reserve?"

Eggman wasn't nearly as amused. "That does it! Now I'm setting these to go off on *impact!* "

The Egg Cracker's cannon fired another slew of spike balls, this time aimed at Rin. Before they reached her, Sonic made a move of his own. Getting between Mage and bomb, he ran around in a tight circle, creating a miniature whirlwind. This caught the spike balls and sent them high into the air. The bombs collided with each other and created a massive explosion that almost knocked Rin off of her feet. But just as she was regaining her balance, Sonic scooped her up and made a mad dash away from the blast.

"I'd say we've worn out our welcome," Sonic told her, "Besides, I think I found a way out of here!"

Sonic stopped, and Rin saw that they were standing in front of a large, egg-shaped hatch labeled, 'Emergency Exit: Use Only In Case Of Emergencies'. There was also a smaller label, reading, 'WARNING! Do Not Use Unless Flying Torpedo is on Water Surface!'

Horror flowed into Rin's features as she realized where the hatch led- and what Sonic was about to do. "No! No! We're not..."

Sonic had already forced the hatch open. "Toolatethisway'smorefun!"

Rin's terrified shrieks bounced up and out of the chute as she and Sonic fell down it. Eggman punched his console in frustration. As the pair continued their high-speed descent, Sonic activated his communicator.

"Tails, get ready to catch us! we're about to- Rin, stop screaming, I can't hear myself- come out of the airship!" Sonic yelled into the speaker, "Track us with the GPS!"

"Okay, Sonic, leave it to me!" Tails replied, and the ME's screen turned black, with a red arrow spinning around. "Do you see them, Saber?"

"Not- Wait, there!" Saber pointed. In the distance, she could see a dot falling from the airship. She could also a faint screaming.

"I see 'em!" Tails twisted the yoke, "Hang on!"

Saber bent down and held on to the wing as the *Tornado* curved and shot towards the falling pair. Once they were close enough, the biplane went into a nosedive. While Tails had down this sort of thing dozens of times with Sonic, he was worried that Rin's inexperience with these high velocity might hurt her. Therefore, he had to make

the catch at a curve in order to invert her inertia and hopefully keep her guts from spilling out.

Reaching out with one hand, Saber took hold of Rin and pulled her from Sonic's arms and into her own grip. The Hedgehog took this moment to grab hold of the *Tornado*'s wings. Once everyone was aboard, Tails began to level out the plane. Once this action was complete, Saber deposited Rin into the back seat.

"You okay, Rin?" Tails asked.

Instead of answering, Rin forced her head over the side. A hideous retching noise was lost in the wind.

Tails winced. *Great...I just got this thing waxed...*

Standing up, Sonic brushed himself off. "Well, I'd call that a Rank-A success. Wanna stop by a Denny's on our way back?"

"Not yet," Saber said, drawing her sword. Sonic that there was a steel in her eyes and voice stronger than the one in her hands. "It is time we put an end to this."

There was a brilliant flash of light. Saber had removed Invisible Air from her sword. Without the spell to bend the air currents, there was nothing to hide the true form of Saber's blade.

And it was a sword Sonic had seen before.

It was in a different place. A different story. But Sonic could recognize that weapon anywhere.

Light began to gather around the metal. Saber lifted the sword over her head. She stared resolutely at the departing airship.

Eggman furrowed his brow as he stared at his console's screen. Smack dab in the center of the footage was Saber and her glowing

sword.

"What's going on now?" He asked aloud. A red light began to flash, and a series of numbers flashed by. " *Uh oh* ."

" *EX...* "

There were different types of Noble Phantasms. Lancer's *Gae Bolge* could pierce through time in order to reach his victim's heart without fail. And while he could do it multiple times at once, it was still a weapon that could only strike a single opponent. Saber's, however, was of an entire different nature. It wasn't one she could freely use in Fuyuki. Not because of the minimal Prana she received from Shirou (Although that was certainly an unavoidable factor). Her Noble Phantasm was one that affected everyone and everything within its radius. It was an ability-type called anti- *fortress* . Unleashing it within the city was unthinkable. Even if she could bury her own honor down deep enough to forego the safety of the citizens, her Master would never agree to such a pyhrric victory. But out in over the ocean, with the sky as a backdrop...

...She swung the sword down...

" *...CALIBER!* "

There was a brilliant flash of light, so great that it briefly eclipsed the sun. And when it faded, there was no sign of the *Flying Torpedo*. The *Tornado* did a U-turn and flew back to Fuyuki.

The Japanese Air Defense jets also returned to base. Captain Reiji's formal report on the mission had to undergo numerous re-writes, before it was decided that his cockpit had been low on oxygen, and he had hallucinated the 'giant sword beam of certain death' while Eggman's ship self-destructed due to some unforeseen accident.

By the time Kotomine got home, he was stressed from arranging all of those memory alterations. But, he was pleased with his work.

Zouken Matou was also pleased. Thanks to Sakura, that stupid *tanuki* had given all of the information he needed to make some sense of the current situation.

He didn't care about Dr. Eggman. Not at all. Even the idea, laughable as it was, that Eggman could track Magecraft with his technology.

But the Emeralds...these Chaos Emeralds, could be what he needed to achieve his wish, after all of these years.

No Servants, no Command Seals, the wizened mummy of a Mage thought greedily, *Just power to whomever can gather them.*

And gather them he will. Or wait for someone else to gather them...

Caster was pleased. While her first foray in the Special Zone had not yielded a Chaos Emerald, the Power Rings she gathered during her time there were a worthwhile consolation prize. Even without her sixth sense, she could feel the energy they radiated. With them, she could bolster her Magecraft without taking Mana from the citizens of Fuyuki. From what she had gleaned from her scrying, Special Zones reappeared after a certain amount of time. She would make another attempt to take the Chaos Emerald at a later date. For now, she would experiment, and prepare her spells. Maybe she would be able to send Assassin off as something more than a gatekeeper.

And next time, Caster thought, holding one ring to her eye. *I'll be prepared for those stupid spike balls...*

As Caster teleported into the Ryuudou Shrine, she didn't notice a blinking light from one of the statues...

When the *Tornado* landed at the Tohsaka Mansion, Shirou and Archer were already there to greet the crew. They had been there

since the battle at the harbor, waiting for everyone to come home.

Seeing both Saber on the wing and Rin in the back seat brought a relieved smile to Shirou's face. And while Archer's face was as stoic as ever, his heart shared Shirou's sentiments. Having mostly gotten over her nausea, Rin flashed the two boys a shaky thumbs-up. Tails laughed, and Sonic grinned.

And then Saber fell off.

"Saber!" Shirou cried, rushing over. Reinforcing his legs without even realizing, he managed to catch his Servant before she hit the ground. "Saber, are you alright?!"

"This is...nothing, Shirou," Saber assured faintly, "I am merely...tired...from using my Noble Phantasm."

"You what?" Shirou asked, and behind him, Archer's eyes widened.

She used Excalibur? The bowman wondered, *What kind of battle did she experience to resort to that?*

That's why she's like this...using a Noble Phantasm requires an enormous amount of Prana, Shirou realized, More than a second-rate Mage like me can supply. Wait, that's it! He dug into his pockets, and brought out a handful of Power Rings. "Saber, take these! Use them to restore yourself! That's an order!"

Saber glanced up at Shirou's determined eyes, and then reached out for his hand. The Rings glowed even brighter, and one by one, they floated off of Shirou's palm and into her body. Once the glow subsided, the knight's pallor returned, and she stood up, though still clearly tired.

"Thank you, Shirou." Saber said, smiling.

"You shoulda seen it, man," Sonic said, hopping off of the biplane's wing. "Saber blew up Eggman's airship single-handedly!"

"What?" Shirou asked, looking at the Hedgehog.

"Here, watch this," Tails said, flying out of the cockpit with the Miles Electric. "I managed to get it on camera. Check out *this* action!"

Shirou gaped at the recorded footage of Saber swinging down her sword, which was followed by a blinding light.

"Yeah, Eggman *wishes* he could build a death ray like that!" Sonic laughed, "Oh, I wish I could've seen the look on his face."

At hearing Eggman's name, Rin allowed herself a smile of her own. "That's one less thing for us to worry about. It didn't exactly go as I wanted, but the plan worked, at least. Mission accomplished."

"What do you mean?" Tails asked.

"I mean he's dead," Rin answered. A bit more thoughtfully, she added, "Look, I imagine you guys have some code of honor against killing, but this is serious. The longer Eggman kept attacking the city, the more likely the Mage's Association will take drastic action. We had to finish Eggman off."

"That's what I mean," Tails replied, "What makes you think Eggman's dead?"

"You think he could have survived Saber's Noble Phantasm?" Archer asked.

"Hey, this wouldn't be the first time someone shot a death ray through his ship with him on it." Sonic commented.

"But...But...that's impossible!" Rin shouted, "How could anyone survive what Saber did?!"

"Look, the last time we foiled Eggman's schemes, it resulted in a black hole sucking up his space station," Tails explained, "If you can explain *that* one, I'd love to hear it."

"I...I wouldn't even know where to begin..." Rin said helplessly. Once more she felt a huge gap between her own skills and experiences and that of Tails'. It took the wind out of her metaphorical 'victory balloon.'

"So everything that happened today was completely pointless..." Shirou groaned.

"Jeez, you guys are depressing. No wonder ya'll suck at this hero thing," Sonic sighed, on his way to a tree to sit under. He rested his head against the trunk. "Look, we took out one of Eggman's battleships, and every weapon on it. That's less weapons Eggy's gonna throw at us next time."

"He's right, Shirou," Saber piped up, "The War may not be over, but for now...we have achieved a victory. That is something to take pride in."

Shirou exhaled. Saber had a point. Eggman had used up a lot of robots at the harbor. And with the destruction of his airship- which could go underwater- it would be a while before he could launch another attack. That gave them some time before he could try again.

Dr. Eggman staggered into the factory section of the Egg Saucer. The ends of his mustache were so frayed that it looked like someone had attacked him with a jagged, bent comb. When his instruments detected the energy output from Sabers sword, Eggman immediately evacuated the *Flying Torpedo* . The power stones he had taken from Rin allowed him to bolster the Egg Mobiles shields enough to survive the blast, and then limp back into his base. The minute he touched down in the launch bay, his hovercraft had fallen to pieces.

Orbot and Cubot looked up from a Egg Pod. Seeing Eggman, Orbot hovered over. Clasping his hands together, the red round robot said, "Welcome back, Dr. Eggman!"

Cubot followed suit. "So, how did it go?"

Eggman glared at the yellow, blocky robot, pulled his foot back, and kicked Cubot. The Robot soared magnificently in the air, bounced off of a conveyor belt, and landed into a bin labeled, "BROKEN PARTS WITH SHARP EDGES".

"...I'll assume it went badly." Orbot guessed, wisely hovering out of legs length.

"It was a total disaster!" Eggman shouted, waving his arms in frustration. "I almost got killed, *and* I lost the Flying Torpedo in one fell swoop!"

"Maybe you shouldn't leave the self-destruct where Sonic'll find it." Cubot suggested, pulling himself out of the bin. There was small bits of shrapnel stuck in his joints.

Eggman huffed. "It wasn't Sonic this time...not completely, anyway. How can I conquer a world if it's full of super-powered kids?"

"Aww, don't be like that, doc," Cubot said, removing shards with Orbot help. "Maybe somethin'll turn up!"

Cubot tossed one metal piece absent-mindedly into the air. It landed on the Egg Pod's top button, pushing it down. The Pod's doors opened up, and a teenaged boy with blue hair not unlike *wakame* tumbled out. Gasping, Shining Matou looked up at his new surroundings, his face equal parts confused and frightened.

Eggman was also confused, but far less frightened. "What the- how'd *he* get in there?" the doctor demanded, stomping over to Shinji.

Hearing Eggman's shout, Shinji turned around. The sight of the madman approaching caused a very feminine shriek to spill out of his mouth. His instinct bade him to flee, so Shinji turned away. This put him faced to face with Cubot- who was holding a piece of jagged metal. A second shriek followed.

"Ahhh!" Cubot reeled back. "Right in my ear-part!"

"That's strange," Orbot murmured, putting the shards he had taken off Cubot back in the bin. "I wonder how he got in there."

"Well, never mind how he got here, get rid of him!" Eggman ordered, "I don't have time for this!"

"Get rid of me?" Shinji gasped, struggling to stand up. "Wha...what are you going to do?"

"Sir?" Orbot asked, turning to his master.

Eggman waved a dismissive hand. "Just toss him overboard. Let the ocean do the work for us."

"Wait," Cubot raised a hand, "What if he's one of those kids with superpowers?"

Orbot took out the Eggman Electric and scanned Shinji. A beeped a few times before giving off an obnoxious buzz.

"Not according to this," Orbot reported, "He's completely clean of Chaos energy."

"Oh, never mind," Cubot shrugged, "Let's get 'im."

The two robots advanced on Shinji. The powerless Matou quaked in fear at their approach.

"Wa...wait!" Shinji cried out, holding out his hands. "Don't do this! You don't want to do this!"

"Oh, and why not?" Eggman asked sarcastically.

There were moments when inspiration struck. An idea would just make itself known with the force and suddenness of a bolt of lightning. The same thing happened to Shinji.

And with the same amount of collateral damage.

"Because I can tell you about those super powered kids!" Shinji shouted.

The robots stopped. Eggman smoothed out his mustache. Shinji felt a grin forming on his face as an idea formed in his head.

"Go on..." Eggman offered, rubbing his chin.

He remembered what Rider told him about the robot Saber thought during the night. He remember how difficult Saber had it during the daytime attack. Shinji realized that the key to victory was right in front of him.

And unfortunately, so did Eggman.

"So, tell me," Shinji began, "What do you know about the Holy Grail War...?"

TO BE CONTINUED

Tiger Dojo

Taiga: When there is no more room in Hell, the Tiger Dojo shall walk the Earth! This is your instructor, Fujimura Taiga!

Illya: And Illya, the Number 1 student, is also here!

Taiga: It's finally happened! The event we hoped would never pass! Eggman knows about the Holy Grail War!

Illya: That stupid Shinji, what's he doing? You'd think even the most useless member of one of the Holy War's founding families would have more pride than that.

Taiga: As one of Shinji's teachers, and the supervisor of the archery club he's part of, I can explain Shinji's actions. He's very greedy, and very shortsighted. I think it's a Matou thing. I once met his grandfather for a parent-teacher conference, and he seemed to act the same way.

Illya: Figures.

Taiga: Anyway, this puts an end to the first arc, "Sonic in Fuyuki". To celebrate, we will allow a cameo of the first reviewer who guessed this plot twist was coming!

Illya: What twist? It was obvious that Shinji would rat us out.

Taiga: Pipe down! (*Whacks Illya*)

Thunder Dragon: Hey.

Taiga: Okay, you can leave, now.

Thunder Dragon: But-

Taiga: Out! (*Punts Thunder Dragon out*)

Illya: You're so mean.

Taiga: It's important to set boundaries. Otherwise, they'll walk all over- Hey, what are those papers you're holding?

Illya: That Stuart guy was snooping around the castle, so I had Sella steal some files from as revenge.

Taiga: Young lady! Stealing from a government official is a felony! ... Can I see?

Illya: No, they're mine.

Taiga: Hand those over, you little brat! I'm confiscating them!

Illya: Hey, leggo! Don't make me call in Berserker! Wait, you're gonna hit the-

Klckgrrrfzzz

From the files of Agent Stuart_

The following individuals are hereby listed as suspect for the Fuyuki case__

Please place them under Level 1 monitoring__

[Sonic]

Notable features: Blue quills coming from his head, red and white sneakers.

Special skills: super human running speed estimated to reach 650 mph.

Description: this strange creature was sighted a day or so before the high school attack. The first eyewitness claimed to have been saved from a serial killer. Since then, there have been numerous reports of a 'blue streak' speeding by throughout the city. Though superficially obnoxious, the creature seems benign in nature. He has been also sighted in the vicinity of...

[Emiya Shirou]

Notable features: red hair, gold eyes.

Special skills: repairing appliances, cooking, archery.

Description: a survivor of the Great Fire of Fuyuki, Shirou was adopted and raised Emiya Kiritsugu following the disaster. Due to the trauma, he has no memories of his previous family. Though functional, Shirou seems to suffer from a form of survivors guilt where he does not turn down any request asked of him. Furthermore, scanners salvaged from robots indicate that his body contains a small amount of X energy, the amount of which fluctuates depending on his proximity with...

[Saber]

Notable features: blond hair tied in a bun, with a single strand loose on her forehead.

Special skills: swordsmanship, eating three times her body weight, motorcycle riding.

Description: Kiritsugu's former subordinate from 10 years ago, Saber vanished from the public eye following the Great Fire. Strangely enough, she seems to have not aged during that time! The large amounts of X energy inside her may be a factor in her apparent agelessness. Wherever she was, she has reappeared to act as Shirou's bodyguard during this period mysterious deaths and mass fainting. She has a very stoic behavior, but so far has not shown any hostile activity.

Fzzzzzzzip!

Taiga: Oh, good. We're back. You should be more careful, Illya-chan.

Illya: *You're* the one who knocked the camera over!

Taiga: That's all the time we have left! We'll see you at the next practice!

Illya: We'll be seeing you! Roll the credits!

Magi

Chapter 10: Magi

Tying my hair into a bun, I walk towards the Stone. There was a faint mist of the early morning drifting all about. Still, even in that haze, I could see the Sword, its hilt almost beckoning any and all. I knew that what I had to do. My country has been in turmoil for years, ever since my father died. If there is to be peace, then my first move is obvious. But then I stop. While I had decided with my mind to take it, there is a lingering doubt in my heart. The people would never accept a woman king. To accept this mantel...

"Whoever should pull this Sword from the Stone is King of England."

On on the opposite side of the sword is my teacher. Although he has always been a prankster, I could tell that today he is not here for mischief. His tone is level, and his gaze is unflinching, even from beneath his hood.

"Artoria," He said, adjusting his staff. "You should carefully consider it once more before you take it. There's no going back once you touch that sword. You will no longer be human."

I am grateful to him. Though he often pretends to be a nuisance, his wisdom has always been useful. And his words today are both an apology for the fate he has prepared me for, and an assurance that he would not think poorly of me, should I choose to turn back.

But I do not. Instead, I place my hand on the hilt of the Sword and tighten my grip. To him, I say, "Yes, I have come to take this because I so desire."

And so I pull. Unflinching, I draw the Sword from the stone, and when it is completely removed, I hold the blade up in the air for all to see. I could feel its magic permeate through my body. A wind blows

through the land, clearing out the mist. The sun shines off of my Sword. From that day forth, I knew that I was no longer the ward of a knight. I had become that which stands above knights.

Shirou woke up. After getting out of bed, he stopped to check on Saber. She was still asleep. An understandable state, given her previous actions. While the Power Rings had stabilized her condition, using her Noble Phantasm had clearly tired her.

Shirou went to the kitchen. There, he saw Sonic sitting up against the wall. The Sega Genesis sat unused by the television. The Hedgehog had a far off look in his eyes, and his mouth was turned down into a frown. Seeing the normally upbeat hero this way was a bit unsettling, to Shirou.

"Hey, Shirou," Sonic spoke up, "How did it end?"

"How did what end?" Shirou asked.

Sonic turned his eyes to look directly into the Master's. "The Legend of King Arthur...how did it end, in this world?"

Okay, put this on, Tails."

Rin handed Tails a small pendant. It was half the size of his palm, and it hung from a string that was tied in a loop. Inside the case, surrounded by numerous tiny runes carved into the walls, was another jewel stuck firmly in the center of a Power Ring.

After hanging it around his neck, Tails asked, "Now what?"

Rin didn't answer him. Instead, she narrowed her eyes, recited a spell, and pointed her index finger directly at the Fox parallel to her. Tails blinked.

"Anything?" Rin asked. Tails shook his head. Unconvinced, Rin sent out a mental command. This caused Tails to frown slight and rub his

head. Rin smiled.

Archer, watching on the sidelines, telepathically asked, *what did you do?*

I ordered him to roll over and beg. Rin replied through their mindlink.

That's a bit mean.

But he was able to resist it, Rin pointed out, *that means this test was a success! Now it's your turn.*

Huh?

It was the day after the following the Harbor Battle. Team Archer was currently engaged in a little R&D. Even though they had won a battle, the war, especially the Holy War, was still going on. There were still the other Masters to deal with. The identities of Caster, Assassin, Lancer's Masters were still unknown, and Caster herself had still not shown herself. To keep them on the defensive, the alliance had chosen not to claim Eggman had been defeated to Kotomine.

Currently, Rin, with Tails' help, was developing a charm from the Power Rings. The idea was to adjusting the Rings' protective properties from shielding the body to the mind. Super speed or immense strength was nothing if you couldn't keep your head straight. Berserker was proof of that. It was a good thing the Einzberns had chosen to summon the mighty Herakles as a mindless brute. God knows just how one-sided a fight would be if they had chosen any other class.

With some reluctance, Archer took the charm from Tails. As he placed it around his neck, he pointed out, "You realize that even if these new trinkets do keep *your* Magecraft out, they might not be as effective against a more powerful Mage?"

"Of course I do," Rin replied, "But it's not like there are any other Mages I can trust to help me- Emiya -kun 's hopeless when it comes to enchantments, remember- Uh oh."

Archer nodded. He realized it the minute he put the charm on.
"Rin..."

Run rubbed her forehead. "I know, I can sense it too. Damn!"

"What's wrong?" Tails asked.

"The charm increases my spell resistance, but also disrupts my ability to use Magecraft," Archer explained, taking the pendent off. "For a Servant, whose very existence is a work of Magecraft, it's like putting on a suit of armor that's too heavy to walk around in."

"And I thought I got it right this time," Rin muttered, sorely disappointed. She had hoped to create a way to support Archer a bit more, only to hit a brick wall. "Did you feel anything, Tails?"

Tails shook his head. "No. I felt fine. When you cast a spell, I got a bit of a buzz, but aside from that, nothing," He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "If I understand your magic right, you control someone's senses by using your own Prana to influence the flow of my Mana, or something, right?"

"That's about right..." Rin replied.

"Well, this probably disrupts my own flow of Mana enough to render your spell useless." Tails finished.

Run sighed. "It's supposed to shield, not disrupt. I guess since you don't use Magecraft, it's okay for you to have it..."

Archer handed the charm back to Tails. Tails put the charm on and began to fly around the room.

"Well, it's not a total loss," The fox commented, "You can give these out to common people, and they would be safe from other Mages!"

Rin laughed bitterly. Oh, she could do that. Now more than ever, she remembered how the Fourth War's Caster team had used their Magecraft to lure innocent kids off of the street, only to butcher them. Rin had tried to save them, only to fail. In fact, if it hadn't been for "Uncle" Kariya, she would have been killed just as easily. Now it was possible to prevent such a tragedy from happening again.

Except the Mage's Association wouldn't appreciate Rin wantonly spreading Magecraft around. Especially in the current circumstances. They hadn't made any moves yet, but if the situation in Fuuyuki deteriorated anymore, they would. Luckily, Eggman's repeated attacks had resulted in an increased military presence, which meant the Association wouldn't be able to turn the city into glass without provoking a war between Japan and England. Rin had also sent a report to Clock Tower about the new creation of Prana detecting radar introduced by Eggman, which she figured would keep the Association at bay for a short period. She doubted that while many would believe her outright, the *idea* of such technology existing should make the Mages more cautious. (The lords of Clock Tower were driven more by self-interest than common morality, and hesitant to take any action that would put their own welfare at risk.) This gave them some time to prepare for the worst.

"Look, it's not as bad as that!" Bazett was yelling into the phone. "I'm *fine*! The media's just blowing this out of proportion! That's what the media *does*!" She paused to listen, then said. "Well, stop blaming everything on gas leaks!" She hung up and wiped her brow. "I swear, I should just quit and join the circus..."

"How'd it go?" Amy asked, shuffling a deck of cards.

"Well, I managed to convince them not to send in a full battalion," Bazett sighed, taking her chair. "That's progress, I guess."

"Is it really? I'm starting to think we could use the help." Amy pointed out.

Bazett briefly grimaced. She knew that among the assets the Mage's Association provided, help was not one of them. Their only real concern was research, and maintaining the secrecy that allowed them to perform less-than-moral experiments. The only times they ever moved in on the illicit activities of outside Mages was when their own research threatened to expose that secrecy...or they managed to discover something really cool, which the Association would "Confiscate for the greater good". Bazett herself had executed many "Sealing Designations" before the Grail War, sometimes beating the target into a barely-functioning mess, all without flinching. However, her own brush with death and blossoming friendship with Amy had given Bazett a new perspective on her life. A perspective she was not comfortable sharing.

"The other enforcers aren't very careful when it comes to collateral damage," Was Bazett's excuse, "Normally, we can erase memories with spells if it comes to that, but the circumstances might arouse more suspicion...what are you doing?"

Bazett's dialogue had been derailed by Amy's current activity; Shuffling, drawing, and arranging her cards. Upon closer inspection, Bazett saw that they were tarot cards.

"What, this?" Amy gestured at the cards, "Just something I thought we could do while your wound heals," Seeing Bazett's skeptical look, Amy went on. "What, these things work! Really!"

"Really." Bazett repeated wryly. Even among Mages, the reliability of tarot cards was subject to much incredulity. Not that students at Clock Tower wouldn't indulge themselves in an attempt to figure what questions would be on their next exam. But after several vague, misleading, and sometimes nonsensical answers, the deck would either be tossed in the trash, set on fire, or tossed into the trash while on fire.

But Amy would not let Bazett's disbelief get her down. "Yes, really! In fact, these cards are how I met Sonic!"

Okay, this one I have to hear. Bazett thought, giving Amy her full attention. During their time together, the pink Hedgehog would drop hints and brief mentions of the various adventures she had gone on in her world. Because she needed to focus on defeating Kotomine, retrieving Lancer, and killing that shadow, Bazett had just let them breeze by without mention. But with her wound still healing from the blond man's attack, Bazett had nothing but time and now her curiosity was piqued.

Taking Bazett's silence as her cue, Amy began her story, "Well for a few years beforehand, I've always wanted to meet the famous Sonic The Hedgehog, hero of the world...but I could never catch up with him. 'Fastest thing alive' isn't just a theme song, y'know. So, I got desperate and took a course in tarot card reading. It took a few tries, but finally I got a message that Sonic would be at Little Planet."

Must be the name of a town. Bazett reasoned.

"It's this tiny planet that appears near mine every few years." Amy explained.

I wish Amy's world wasn't so outrageous.

Amy continued, "Anyway, he was there all right...and so was Eggman! Before I'd gotten a chance to really introduce myself, I was grabbed by Metal Sonic..."

"I'm sorry," Bazett interrupted, "Metal *what?* "

"Metal Sonic's a robot version of Sonic Eggman built," Amy explained, non-plussed by the interruption. "Almost as fast, and nowhere *nearly* as handsome!" She giggled.

Bazett rolled her eyes, smiling sardonically. "Naturally." *It's moments like these that make me wonder if I'm still dying on the street, suffering a blood loss-induced hallucination.*

"Well, to make a long story short, Sonic bashed up Eggman's plans and saved me," Amy finished, "And that's the story of how he became my boyfriend!"

"And it's all because of your tarot cards," Bazett remarked, and took a card for closer examination, "Do you always consult your cards, Amy?"

Amy shrugged. "Not really. Only when I'm really desperate. Kinda takes awhile to get a reading you can use."

"And what kind of fortunes have your cards given?" Bazett asked, putting the card back. It seemed that the cards from Amy's world were different than the decks in her own.

Amy frowned. "That's the thing...it's weird, but no matter how many times I shuffle the deck, it's always the same one."

"Which is?"

Amy reexamined her current result. "They say, 'A great mistake is being made'."

Yesterday afternoon, Shinji told Eggman *everything* . Well, not *everything*. But enough about the Holy Grail War, and Mages in general to get Eggman *very* interested. And whatever guilt Shinji may have felt about betraying Mages everywhere was washed away the more he talked. If he played his cards right, he could get Eggman to destroy the other Masters and take the Holy Grail.

"This is utterly fascinating," Eggman commented, "So, the Holy Grail grants a wish, hmm?"

"That's right," Shinji replied, "And it all goes to whichever Master is left with the last Servant. Can I have seconds?"

They had moved out of the assembly line. Normally, Eggman would have taken Shinji to the a dark room that only had a chair, a desk, and a lamp to point directly at the questioned. However, because Shinji was being so helpful and informative, the Q/A was taking place on a deck at the Egg Saucer's edge. In front of them, Cubot did some deep sea fishing- a pointless activity, as the line wasn't long enough to even touch the water's surface. Off to the side, Orbot shook his head at his counterpart's foolishness before telling him to quit messing around help with the barbecue. They were having shrimp.

Shinji bit down on a shrimp, and after chewing and swallowing, said, "You know, I'm surprised at how accepting you are. I mean, I always thought scientists didn't believe in magic."

"Ohhh, ho ho ho," Eggman chuckled, "But I *don't* believe in magic!"

"Huh?" Said Shinji, Orbot, and Cubot. In Cubot's case, it was because he noticed something tugging at his line.

"In ancient times, the primitive people randomly declared anything they couldn't understand as a miracle or curse," Eggman explained, "They used the word 'magic' like it was going out of style, never bothering to comprehend the phenomenon or how it works. As a scientist, it's my *duty* to study a phenomenon. Otherwise, how could I hope to exploit it?"

Shinji nodded, impressed and accepting at Eggman's words. Meanwhile, Cubot had begun to reel his line in.

"This *is* rather interesting," Orbot noted, "In our world, people used to believe that the Chaos Emeralds, once you got all seven, granted wishes. And in this universe, we have seven...Servants, you call them?"

"Hmm, that's food for thought," Eggman rubbed his chin, "So, these Servants are...what, magic ghosts, or something?"

"Kinda," Shinji said, "They're heroic spirits- famous historical or mythical figures- brought into the War by the Holy Grail, and given powers based on their legends."

Humming, Eggman pressed down on Orbots head. The spherical robot's eyes began to project images. The first one was that of the Bug Queen.

"Which one is this?" Eggman asked.

"That's Saber." Shinji answered, "She's Emiya's Servant."

"What about this guy? Who's he?" Eggman asked, pressing down on Orbot and changing the image to the white-haired, tanned man.

"That's Archer. He's Tohsaka's." Shinji stated, having already been well-informed of the bowman's attempt to kill Eggman.

Cubot floated up with a Chopper Badnik at the end of his line, just as the image changed again. He took one look at the gargantuan behemoth with fiery eyes and flung his catch into the air in alarm.

" *Aaah!* It's the Stand!" Cubot shrieked.

"That's just a picture, you idiot," Eggman growled, catching the robot fish.

"And *that's* Berserker," Shinji explained, "To be honest, he's the only one who's identity I've figured out."

"Don't tell me, I think I can guess," Eggman interrupted, "He's the missing link, right? The evolutionary stage between ape and man?"

Shinji gave Eggman a weird look. "What? No, that's Hercules. You know, the Greek hero?"

It was Eggman's turn to cast weird look's. "Are you dense? Hercules never existed, he's just a fairy- Oh, wait. Magical parallel universe, I remember."

"Can we please stop?" Orbot asked, "Doing this always makes my eyes hurt?"

"Last one," Eggman changed the image to the red-eyed blond man.

" *Aaah!* It's the guy from *Final Fantasy!* " Cubot shriek. Eggman unceremoniously dropped the Chopper on top of him.

Shinji didn't answer. He studied the picture very carefully. "I have no idea who this is. I mean, he *looks* family- but I think that was before the War started, so he can't be a Servant."

"Well, whoever he is, he totaled one of my sub-bosses." Eggman said as Orbot shut off his projectors, "So, if you can figure out who he is and where he came from, that'd be a real help."

Once the shrimp supply had been exhausted, they moved to Eggman's office. There was a desk, which included a framed portrait of someone Shinji assumed was Eggman's mother (An assumption strengthened by the prominent facial hair), but more importantly there was a TV and game set. And bean bag chairs.

After a round of *Sega Superstars Racing*, Eggman got down to the brass tacks. "All right, Shinji, you've helped clear up some big problems, but now I've got to ask the big question; How does this 'wish' thing work? I mean, what's the *process* ?"

Shinji already had an answer ready. "I'll have to check my family's library." *Like I'm going to tell you everything before I can get home!*

Clever. He's holding out so I'd have to give him a ride home, Eggman thought, *Maybe if I pretend to show an interest, he'll be a bit more free with the intel.* "Okay, here's a personal question, then. What would *you* wish for?"

Shinji leaned back in his bean bag and looked pensive. "I want power."

Orbot nodded. "Don't we all."

"No, I mean..." Shinji sighed unhappily, "Your stupid gadget said I was powerless. The Matous come from a long line of Mages- Heck, we *created* the Grail Wars! -but I was born without any potential for Magecraft," His face darkened and he tightened his fists. "If I had the Holy Grail, I would fix that."

Great, now I've got to deal with teen angst. As if I hadn't gotten enough of that from Shadow... Eggman thought irritably, but kept his face neutral. Then, his features brightened as the 'Lightbulb of Inspiration' turned on. "So, what I'm hearing is, you want to be special."

"That's right." Shinji nodded.

"Unique."

"Yes."

"You want abilities beyond that of normal humans." Eggman was privately pleased to see Shinji twitch.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" Shinji yelled, briefly forgetting that he was technically Eggman's captive. And Eggman not only had big hands, but also had giant robots at his beck and call.

But rather than being upset, Eggman just grinned. "Why don't we make a deal..."

And so, Shinji, outfitted with a shiny, hi-tech watch that was also a radar and communications device, was returned to Fuyuki. After spending the rest of the night eating out and picking up girls (And only getting slapped once, a definite improvement over usual outings), he prepared himself for the first phase of his Genius Master Plan To Steal The Holy Grail And Defeat Everyone.

Bringing us to the present, as Shinji walked towards the entrance of the Matou Manor. When he left, it had been a matter of strategy, and not totally trying to save his own butt. Now that he had Dr. Eggman on his side, he had nothing to worry about.

"So, you've returned." The old as dirt voice greeted.

Well, there was Matou Zouken. Shinji's grandfather was standing right there, a wrinkled and shriveled wall between the young man and his ancestral home. For his entire life, the ancient patriarch of the Matou Clan was a figure of both admiration and terror to Shinji. A man who held all of the power, which he only dispensed to the worthy. All though he would never admit it to anyone, Shinji had hoped to someday earn the malevolent miser's respect.

Clearly, that wasn't going to happen today, as the second thing Zouken said was, "I see you have lost command of Rider."

Shinji sucked in his breath. He knew this was coming. Zouken had never been loose with compliments, and the inverse was true when it came to insults and put downs. But Shinji was ready this time. Putting on a devil may care smirk, he said, "Yeah, bit of a shocker, right?"

"Fool, I never expected victory from a failure like you," Zouken replied coldly, "When I allowed you to become Rider's Master, I had assumed that you would have enough pride to challenge others in spite of your powerlessness. But it seems I was wrong. You couldn't even do that. You have proven to be a complete disgrace to the name Makiri...just like your father, Byakuya."

At the sound of his father's name, Shinji went cold. Shinji used to love Matou Byakuya when he was very young, but that all changed when he learned about the Matou's heritage as Mages. Byakuya had purposely kept his own son in the dark about the Matou's roots as the Makiri clan of Russia, while at the same time preparing Sakura to take the mantle of clan head. That was deepest cut of all, that his own father would see nothing but hopelessness in his son.

Zouken had chosen his words very carefully. He had prepared this speech as part of his plan for Sakura. He knew his grandson would be driven by his condemnation to take drastic liberties with his sister as retaliation.

But Shinji knew something Zouken didn't. After seeing Eggman's weapons and base, he no longer feared Zouken. He had an ally that no Mage could possibly equal. And knowing that gave him a sense of power.

Smiling nastily, Shinji said, "Failure, huh? I guess you would know quite a bit about that, old man."

Zouken frowned. "What?" That wasn't the reaction he was expecting.

"You're so quick to put down pretty much everyone...but really, what makes you so much better?" Shinji asked, "I mean, you're old enough to have gone through two Wars, aren't you? And yet, the Matou clan has never claimed the Holy Grail once, have they?"

Zouken squeezed his cane so hard that only the frail nature of his hands kept the wood intact. Shinji was quite glad to see that his words were having an effect.

"Hell, this time you didn't even the chops to summon a Servant of your own! You had Sakura do it!" Shinji continued his taunt, "All your so-called power, and you're too scared to make yourself a target. Face it, gramps, in the big scheme of things, you're not that much different than me.

"Actually...you're probably worse than me."

Shinji reached out, put his hand on Zouken's head, and gently but firmly pushed the decrepit Mage out his way. He continued into the mansion, shivering with glee. Shinji resisted the urge to kick his heels and laugh. *That felt so good!*

Ironically, Shinji's powerlessness kept him from buckling with fear. Zouken's rage at Shinji's words caused every crest worm in the mansion to squirm, and any Mage would have sensed the Prana flaring up. But what kept the Matou Patriarch from lashing out was his shock. Shock that Shinji, cowardly, gutless, Shinji, would have the nerve to stand up to him.

Looking over his shoulder, Zouken cast his descendant a glare that held nothing but vile thoughts. *Worse than you? We'll see about that! When I attain immortality, I'll spend the first century making you pay for those words!*

wrrr

Zouken forgot about Shinji in an instant. "Who's there!?" He cast out his senses, and sent out familiars. But they could find nothing. As far as he knew, the only two people on the entire grounds were his grandson and himself.

He didn't notice the red ball and yellow cube hiding in the bushes.

" You'll need a way to keep in touch with me, Shinji," Eggman said, and put something on the teen's wrist. "Take this. It's a multi-purpose computational device. Call me as soon as you get new information."

Shinji stared at the device. He had to admit, he was impressed by all of the shiny buttons and chrome finishing. However, there was one part he had to criticize.

" Couldn't you give me something with a different cover?" Shinji asked.

" What are you talking about?" Eggman replied, "That's a very handsome and trendy design."

" It's your face! "

Eggman crossed his arms firmly. "And what's wrong with my face?"

Shinji gulped, but salvation came.

Orbot held up a finger. "I think Shinji is asking for something that won't...advertise his connection to you."

Eggman looked at Orbot, then back at Shinji. He threw up his hands in disgust. "Oh, fine! I'll get you one of the unfinished ones. But you people are making it really hard to develop a brand here!"

Once Shinji was properly outfitted, Eggman and his robots walked the Fuyuki native to the transport.

Orbot carefully nudge Eggman's legs, and whispered, "Are you sure this is a good idea? How do you know we can trust him?"

"I've got a good feeling about this," Eggman whispered back, "After all, I'm an excellent judge of character!"

"But isn't that what you said about Shadow? And that Eggman Nega guy?" Cubot asked innocently.

Eggman turned his head back and forth so he could glare at both of them. "Fine. Since you're such experts on the subject, you can go back to the city and keep an eye on Shinji!"

Orbot and Cubot exchanged looks.

Orbot and Cubot exchanged looks.

"I wonder if they can afford an exterminator." Cubot whispered. Orbot rolled his eyes.

Shirou walked. He didn't think about the where, because he knew his destination.

The Special Zone.

Saber was still tired from using *Excaliber*, and Sonic was willing to watch over her for him, so Shirou was alone. Alone in the crowd, and alone with his thoughts.

Sonic had regaled him with his own journey into Arthurian legend. At the end, he chose to end the story, rather than allowing Camelot to exist forever in a corrupted time loop. In doing so, he had consigned the kingdom's destruction by civil war.

Saber had heard the story too. He had a feeling that the paleness in her skin wasn't from exhaustion.

Shirou still had trouble wrapping his mind around it. Not just about Sonic, but also Saber. Against all odds, he had *two* King Arthurs living in his house! And neither were anything like the stories told over the world.

And stuck in the middle is me, Shirou thought, *The talentless Mage fighting a war that would've killed him if it weren't for some mysterious savior.*

Shirou pushed those thoughts out of his head as he arrived at his destination. As he stepped into the alley, he saw the giant gold ring materialize into the air. Taking a deep breath, Shirou took a running start and leapt.

And vanished.

& break &

Shirou fell through the tunnel of colors. This time, he didn't run. The tunnel seemed to move under his feet, carrying Shirou towards the end.

After Eggman had kidnapped Rin at the Harbor, Shirou had raged. He had vented. He had cursed his apparent powerlessness.

And then Archer said this, "You're problem is that you think you can save anyone with your own strength. That's incorrect. Instead, you should create something that can fulfill your needs."

Shirou didn't understand Archer's words at the time, mostly because he was too upset over Rin being taken away. But after having time to cool down and brood over what happened, he began to wonder...

The words appeared in his mind. *Get 20 Rings!*

Shirou began to shift his body, Projecting his swords (*His* swords. They looked like Archer's, but they felt like *his*) to grind against the floor as a means of steering. Before long, he had gathered up at least 27 Rings. That was the easy part. Getting the 20+ was *always* the easy part.

Get 40 Rings!

Shirou could see them coming a mile away- a distance that was closing fast.

The bombs.

No matter what Shirou did, he couldn't collect Rings and still move fast enough to avoid the bombs. He would only have to brush them and they would explode, causing him to drop precious cargo.

But what if they exploded before he reached them? Would they reappear?

Shirou let his swords vanish. In their place, he Projected a bow in one hand and an arrow in the other. He pulled back, took away, and let one arrow fly.

The arrow struck, and the bomb exploded. Shirou was pleased to see that a mild chain reaction had occurred, taking out the cluster. Invigorated by his success, Shirou began to fire more Projected arrows. Before long, the Special Zone was filled with the sound of

multiple explosions. Shirou was enjoying himself so much that he almost forgot to gather the Rings.

The third challenge was to *Get 70 Rings*

Shirou focused himself. According to Sonic, Special Zones always had three challenges to complete. But if he prevailed, there would be a Chaos Emerald waiting at the end of this technicolor road...

I couldn't stop Eggman from kidnapping Rin, and I wasn't able to help Sonic and Saber save her, Shirou thought, But, this road...reaching the end of this tunnel is something I can do for them!

It was even harder this time. There were clusters of Rings mixed with bombs, and they came at a much faster rate than they did before. Shirou had to fire his Projections even faster, while at the same time position himself to grab Rings as they passed by. It was fast-paced and frantic work, but Shirou kept himself calm. He couldn't let himself be caught up in the moment. He had to maintain his focus.

Shirou kept grabbing Rings, and soon the tunnel became bare. The young Master felt a slight chill. Had he failed? He was so busy shooting and grabbing that he had lost count of how many Rings he had collected...did he fail?

No message appeared in his mind. But soon Shirou saw something in the distance. A tiny, shining red dot. As he got closer, he saw that it was a jewel, as red as his hair. Instinctively, unthinkingly, he reached out...and it fell into his hand.

When the light faded, Shirou was back in the real world- no, the normal world. Whatever meaning that held anymore.

In his hand was the Emerald. The beautiful gem was about the size of his fist, and fit firmly in his hand. The polish was so smooth and clean it was if it had been cut by a God of jewelry.

And it was alive.

Even without Mage craft, Shirou could see a faint pulsing light in the very center of the gem. The Emerald felt warm in his palm. And if Shirou dared to extend his senses, he could taste something far more potent. The energy stored within the Chaos Emerald was greater and more raw than any Mage craft he had felt in his entire life. Shirou dimly recalled Tails mentioning that the power of several Servants could be mistaken for the presence of an Emerald.

Servants!

Shirou suddenly realized what a precarious position he had placed himself into. He had gone into the Special Zone by himself. And now he had a Chaos Emerald , one of seven stones that could perform the Second True Magic. How long did he have until another Servant would risk exposure to attack him? Although it was broad daylight and the street was filled with people, Shirou didn't think that would stop a Master with sufficient motivation. Or worse, what if one of Eggman robots launched another assault?

Shirou, his hands shaking, fumbled to turn on his communicator. It was hard because he was trying to keep the Emerald tucked in his arms, and his excitement and fear kept him shivering.

Sonic's voice came out of the speaker. "Yo."

"Sonic, I have it." Shirou whispered. He wasn't sure why he was whispering.

"Dude, why are whispering?" Sonic asked, "What's going on?"

"I've got the *Chaos Emerald* ." Shirou said a bit louder.

"What?!" Sonic shouted, "You got one? Shirou, that's awesome!"

&break&

Saber had been playing *Echo the Dolphin* when she heard Sonic shout. Putting her game on pause, Saber went outside to the backyard to see what the matter was.

"Sonic, what is going on?" Saber asked.

Sonic's looked at Saber. "Shirou got the Chaos Emerald- y'know, the from that Special Zone you found?" he pretended to wipe away a tear. "Our little Shirou is all grown up!"

" *I heard that.* " Shirou annoyed voice spoke from Sonic's communicator.

Saber was stunned to hear it. Was that why Shirou had left earlier? While she had slept, her Master had gone and achieved a decisive victory!

But Saber began to worry. Shirou was on his own with a powerful artifact that any Mage, to say nothing of the other Masters, would give blood to have. Specifically, someone else's blood.

"Shirou, where are you now?" Saber asked.

" *At the alley,* " Shirou replied, " *I'll meet you back at the...* " There came a pause. " *School.* "

"The school?" Sonic asked, raising an eyebrow.

" *Yes! The high school is still abandoned, and it's closer than my house. I'll go there and wait for you, Saber.* "

"Shirou, that's very reckless," Saber said, "With no people, there will be even less to stop a Servant or Master from attacking you."

" *I know,* " Shirou replied, " *Which means that there'll be less chance of innocents being caught in the crossfire. See you there.* "

The connection broke. Saber and Sonic looked at each other.

"I've gotta radio Tails," Sonic said at once, "He's got something that'll help us hide the Emerald."

"I must meet with Shirou," Saber declared, standing up. She didn't realize that she had knelt to talk into Sonic's wrist. She looked down at Sonic. "This thing...is it portable?"

"It's basically a lunchbox." Sonic answered, almost deadpan.

Saber decided not to argue. "Then go and fetch it," She looked in the direction of Homurahara Academy. "I have a bad feeling about this."

Caster had seen everything. She had watched Saber's Master throw himself into the Special Zone. She had seen him come out of it with the Chaos Emerald. (Okay, she didn't see what happened in the Zone, which meant that she didn't see *everything* , but that's just semantics.)

She resisted the urge to squeal girlishly for two reasons. The first was that as Souichirou- *sama* 's future wife, she had a duty to uphold a certain level of dignity. The second was that Issei was at the temple, he might hear her, and she was *really* tired of having to alter his memory after the time Knuckles asked him what his thoughts on magic were (Some *tanukis* had trouble with the concept of 'stay hidden').

Regardless, Caster couldn't stop herself from shivering with delight as she walked out towards the Temple's gate. Ever since Shirou had left the Special Zone with the Chaos Emerald, she could *taste* the power even without scrying. It was delicious. And she knew that others with even a smidgeon of Magecraft potential would be drawn towards it. She would have to act fast if she wanted to benefit from this opportunity. Luckily, she had already made preparations.

At the top of the steps, Assassin turned his head to look at Caster. His expression was unreadable.

"It's time," the witch said, "You don't *have* to kill them...but if you could, that would be *most* appreciated."

Assassin raised an eyebrow. If Caster had been paying attention, she would have noticed that he was actually looking past her.

In his investigations on the Fuyuki case, Agent Stuart had learned one very important thing; He *hated* the phrase, "file not found_"

But that's what he kept seeing every time he tried to figure out anything on the abnormal people who had entered Fuyuki. Kazuki's bride, a mysterious woman only known as Caster, did not show up in any database Stuart accessed. The same went for her strange manservant, the samurai cosplayer Kojirou Sasaki. Even making a search based on their pictures had yielded nothing. It was as if the two had not existed until a few weeks ago.

Even Saber, whom Stuart had highly suspected to have a connection to the strange events, was also a virtual nonentity. The check on her background showed that the credential she used to enter Japan with Irisviel von Einzbern were patently fake, purchased through illicit channels by the Einzbern family.

Currently, the most mysterious person of all was the strange man acting as Tohsaka's bodyguard. A drone, recently built from the remains of Eggman's technology, had been dispensed to the Tohsaka Mansion for recon. However, just as it was getting close, the unit was inexplicably destroyed. The last thing the long-range camera transmitted was the face of the one Rin called "Archer."

Stuart had already submitted the image to a facial recognition program, but so far had yielded no results. He wasn't sure what to think of it.

Archer wasn't sure what to make of it. The Robot had clearly intruded onto the Tohsakah Mansion grounds, bypassing the

Boundary Field as if it wasn't there. Since the little invader hadn't been a living creature, its presence didn't send any signals to Rin. If Archer hadn't been on the look out and heard the sound of its movements, almost no one would have known the machine was mulling about. It was just another reminder just how careless hereditary Mages could be, mindlessly assuming that their own power was enough protection. But the real problem lay in the Robot itself.

At a first glimpse, it looked like one of Dr. Eggman's Motobug Badniks. However, a more dedicated study of the unit would find key, crucial details. The most striking was the paint job. All of Eggman's machines were designed to stand out- either through their gaudy designs, excessive weaponry, or just being programmed to shout obnoxious noises. The doctor clearly wanted attention to be drawn towards his work.

The machine Archer found was colored to blend in with the grass and bushes. And its claws and other offensive components had been removed. This unit wasn't one of Eggman's work.

Rin, who had come to what Archer had found, knelt down to better look at the damaged robot. "How did this sneak in without being affected by the Boundary Field?"

"Because most Magecraft doesn't affect machines," Archer said pointedly. He held no doubts that if they had met as enemies, Emiya Kiritsugu would have had Tokimi Tohsaka beat.

Rin tried to keep herself from grimacing, but Archer could feel her discomfort. So far, the entire War had been a never ending display of the effectiveness and ingenuity of technology overcoming the limitations of Magecraft. Or, more specifically, the narrow-mindedness of Mages.

If Rin hadn't been looking over his shoulder, Archer would have used his Structural Analysis spell to determine the robot's origin. He had a feeling that it wasn't Eggman who sent the robot. But doing so would

have given Rin a big clue to his identity, and he was sure that she was already suspicious...

"Well, just take it apart," Rin ordered, "Tails can use it for parts, or whatever."

Archer nodded reluctantly. He heard the tell-tale sound of a fluffy chopper and knew that the Fox was coming. Turning around, he saw that Tails had leapt from one of the mansion's upper level windows and was using his trick to slow his descent.

"Archer!" Tails yelled, "Quick! Help me take the tarp off!"

After their little run-ins with the Japanese Air Force, Rin insisted that the *Tornado* be better hidden. After the destruction of the *Flying Torpedo*, Shirou, Tails, and Archer fashioned a large canvas to cover the plane, which was then tied down by ropes and stakes.

Sensing the urgency in Tails' voice, Archer did not argue as he went over to undo the bindings on the cover. Besides, he knew that it would be Rin to ask questions.

And she did. "Tails, What's going on?" Rin watched as Tails landed by Archers side. "You're not planning to go anywhere, are you?"

"I'm not," Tails replied. He tapped a spot on the bi-plane body and a compartment opened up. "But Shirou found a Chaos Emerald!"

"What?!" Exclaimed both Rin and Archer.

"Yeah, Sonic just called me about it," Tails said, digging through the compartment. "But we've gotta work fast. No telling how long it'll be before some creep like Lancer or another Master might go after him!"

Rin may not have been quick on the uptake when it came to advanced machinery, but she caught on to the tactical implications of this development instantly. "We need to store the Emerald

someplace so that no one can trace it," She said, more to herself. "One of my family's possessions is a chest that contains an infinite space. We can hide the Emeralds in there."

"Really? You've *got* one of those?" Tails asked, pulling something out of the plane. "Cool! And I was gonna put it in this!"

Tails held up his find. It was a briefcase-like object. On its side was an emblem that looked depressingly (To Rin) like Sonic's head. It even had Sonic's eye shape.

"You're going to pack the Chaos Emerald in your luggage?" Archer asked.

"Yeah, but don't worry, it's lined with a lead-alloy polymer," Tails explained, "The polymer will block the basic energy the Emerald emits, keeping it off of the enemy's radar."

"And you had one just conveniently stored in your plane." Archer noted, with a small trace of irony.

"After a while, you learn to be prepared." Tails replied.

"Well, I suppose that's easier to transport for now..." Rin conceded. Inwardly, she was glad not to use the chest her family received from Zelrech. *It* was already locked inside of the box, and she didn't want to take the chance of *it* escaping. She went over to take the case. "I'll take it over to Emiya so when can check if it blocks Magecraft as well."

Tails said, "Actually, Sonic said he'll be over to pick it up himself," Seeing Rin grit her teeth, he added, "Don't worry, he promised he wouldn't let himself get caught. After all, even if he has to dart between shadows, he'll still be able to get this to Shirou faster than we would. After all, it's not like a Servant is going to pick a fight with him in the middle of daylight."

Lancer didn't like this. Not one bit.

Shortly, Kotomine had received an interesting tidbit; That Sonic the Hedgehog would be traveling around the shopping district towards the high school. The Church Official had relayed this to Lancer, with orders to capture or, better yet, kill Sonic. Normally, fighting in broad daylight- in a public place, even! -was forbidden. While Saber had managed to get away with it by not using her full abilities, Lancer knew that there'd no way to fight Sonic while holding back. Luckily, the spearman had a trick up his sleeve. And it was so easy to bend the rules when the man enforcing them happened to be backing you. Still, the whole thing put Lancer on the edge. The message Kotomine received had come from one of Caster's familiars...and nothing good had come from the dealing with witches.

He spotted something blue streaking across the city. Sonic was being more careful than he usually was. Rather than just blasting through the city at top speed like he normally did, Sonic was darting between alleys and hiding spaces, moving only when he could do so without being spotted. This made it easier for Lancer to prepare for battle.

Jabbing his spear into the ground, Lancer carved a rune. Then, resuming his actual form, he went off to do again. And again. In his life, Chu Chulainn had studied Magecraft under Scáthach in the Land of Shadows. Under this training, he had obtained 18 Norse Runes. With just the *Ansuz* Rune, he could set a blaze that could reduce an entire room to ashes and leak out to the rest of the building. However, Lancer's current goal wasn't destruction...

...but repulsion.

Sonic stopped running. The street he was running in had become mysteriously bare. And he had just felt a strange tingle in his body. He had felt it before, at Homurahara Academy, and at the Harbor.

I suppose this is the part where the monster pops out... Sonic mentally assumed, and was not surprised when Lancer landed in front of him. Sometimes I hate being right.

"I think it's time we finished this." Lancer said. For some reason, his voice lacked the usual arrogance.

"I'd love to, but right now I'm in a hurry to get somewhere," Sonic said, bouncing on his toes. "Why don't we try this later?"

Sonic became a blur as he tried to circle around Lancer. But the Servant had anticipated this, and was moving to intercept. Sonic had to stop and jump back to avoid being skewered on his spear.

"I thought you magic ghosts weren't allowed to come out in the day," Sonic noted, "Isn't that the golden rule of this, quote-unquote-" He made some finger quotations. "'Holy War'? 'Thou Shalt Not Get Caught'?"

"I know," Lancer said, pointing his spear at Sonic's heart. "That's why I cast a Boundary Field to keep away any witnesses."

Sonic's quills went rigid. "You can do that!?"

Lancer allowed himself a smirk. He couldn't stave off the feeling that they were being set up, but it was worth it to see Sonic get surprised for once. "'Magic' ghost, remember?"

To be continued

Tiger Dojo

Taiga: *Meri Kurisumasu! Hapi Nu Ye-arui! And Feliz Navidad!* It's the Tiger Dojo, Christmas Edition! Bringing you the gift of knowledge is I, Fujimura Taiga!

Illya: And the Number One Student bringing the gift of marketable cuteness is I, Illya!

Taiga: It didn't take long for things to heat up again! Eggman knows about the Grail, and Caster is making her move.

Illya: And I didn't make another appearance! What the *Hell*, author!?

Taiga: Calm yourself, my protege! I haven't made an appearance either, and you don't hear me complaining, do you?

Illya: But, you're just a minor character! You're not a heroine, like me! You could drop out of the story entirely, and no one would care!

Taiga: Silence! (*Whacks Illya*)

Illya: Gah!

Taiga: Our first question comes from Kaiser Dragon, "Will Sonic use HIS Caliburn?!" Probably not!

Illya: That sword only existed in an illusionary world that was born in an alternate universe. The Wizard Marshal Zelrech *could* bring it to ours, but it's unlikely he'd interfere in what's happening in Fuyuki.

Taiga: Our next question was sent in by Taromaro. "Is there any possibility in Nazo being an antagonist?" Huh? Who's Nazo?

Illya: According to the Sonic Wiki, Nazo is a term regarding an unused Super-Sonic form for the *Sonic X* anime. The name came from an image file for this Super form, called " ".

Taiga: I see, so "Nazo" doesn't exist...

Illya: And if he doesn't exist, he can't appear! We barely have enough room in this story for canon characters!

Big: That's for sure.

Froggy: (*Ribbit*)

Taiga: Our last question is from Ortizale317. They write, "Which Route are they following? Is it mixed?"

Illya: Obviously the story won't be predictable and play out like one of the original three Routes. But, mixed? Hmmm...It works like this. Every universe has a definite "Path" that they must follow. This path goes from the Beginning to the End. The future has already happened, and we just haven't reached it yet. The people of Fate will subconsciously try to stay on the path that has been laid out for them, but the interference from the Sonic characters has disrupted that path and their method of going down it.

Taiga: For example! Matou Zouken tried to belittle Shinji for losing Rider's Command Seals with the speech he used in the Heaven's Feel Route. However, thanks to his encounter with Dr. Eggman, Shinji was not offended, and even gained the strength to stand up to his abusive grandfather!

Illya: And Zouken had never expected Shinji to grow a spine like that, so he didn't know how to respond! Otherwise, he would have just killed Shinji right there.

Taiga: The future has become unknown! We must either tread cautiously, or charge in at full speed!

Illya: Huh? That doesn't make sense!

Taiga: What doesn't make sense that this story doesn't have a TV Tropes page, yet!

Big: There's a page.

Taiga: What?

Froggy: *(Ribbit)*

Big: The Literary Lord made it a little bit ago.

Taiga: Ooh, I have to see this! That concludes the Q/A! *(Runs off)*

Illya: Great, it'll be forever before she gets done editing...

Froggy: (*Ribbit*)

Subtitle: Thanks, Literary Lord!

Illya: See you at the next practice!

Catch Me If You Can

Chapter 11: *Catch Me If You Can*

Saber ran as fast as she could down the streets of Fuyuki. Of course, given that it was still daylight and there were people out and about, "Fast as she could" fell far beneath her true maximum speed. However, in her anxiety, she found herself subconsciously pushing the limits of what ordinary humans were capable of. Several passerby's found themselves wondering how such a short, foreign girl was moving so quickly. Heedless of their confusion, Saber continued her run. All she could think about was her Master, who had made himself the most important target in the War. A bad feeling had been welling up in her heart ever since Shirou had reported his find. Although Sonic was on his way to help hide the Chaos Emerald, the King of Knights would not rest easy until she could see her Master's face with her own eyes.

Shirou, please, use the Command Seal and summon me! Saber begged desperately in her mind, There is no telling how many enemies may attack you while you hold that Emerald!

"Wow." Cubot remarked. If he had built with a nose, it have been buried in the ancient textbook he held.

"What is it?" Orbot asked, "Did you discover something?"

"Yeah," Cubot said, "Whoever this Justeace lady was, that Zolgen guy was nuts about her. This book is full of nothing but Russian poetry about her. Bad grammar, too."

"That's because you downloaded a cheap translator off of the internet," Orbot sighed, taking the grimore away. "Now could you please focus- Something's coming!"

The two robots went into their compact modes and tucked themselves behind a bookshelf. The buzz of a moth-like familiar came and went. It was through this method that the electronic pair had infiltrated the Matou Manor. Although Zouken's familiars and Boundary Field would have noticed living creatures, they completely ignored the robots. So long as Orbot and Cubot did nothing to draw their attention, the flying worms would not notice the robots.

Shinji also ignored the robots. He had smuggled them into the Manor by keeping his bedroom window open, and assumed they would hide under his bed while Shinji did his research. That they would sneak into the clan library undetected came as a mild surprise, though not unwelcome one. Orbot in particular was good when discarded books needed to be put back in their shelves.

Shinji hadn't done this sort of thing for a while. When he had first learned of his family's history, he had thrown himself into the library, eagerly preparing to master the spells when it was his turn to learn the craft. Then he found that Oh, Never Mind, We Don't Need You, Son. That had soured Shinji scholarly habits. The Holy War had given the Matou teen new reason to skim the tomes, but Shinji had put more focus on increasing Rider's powers than learning what he had to tell Eggman- namely, what happened once all but one of the Servants had been killed.

The answer was here, he was sure of it.

Shirou wasn't sure what he was doing. He had arrived at the deserted high school to wait for either Sonic or Saber to show up and take the Chaos Emerald off of his hands- but was that the right decision? He had chosen to go to Homurahara instead of his house, or even Tohsakah's, because of the fear that doing so would give a particularly dangerous Servant an excuse to invade their homes.

Now that he was at the empty campus, Shirou realized what a mistake he had made. Even with the antics of the Sonic's-worlders (as he had taken to call them), the rule of secrecy was still being

upheld. If a Master wanted to attack a populated area, they would have to expend precious Prana to hide their activities from normal people. A location devoid of witnesses- *like the school* - would spare them the need to do anything of the sort. If a Servant was fast enough, they wouldn't even need to create a Boundary Field...

Shirou heard a rustling noise, and his entire body tensed. The smart thing to do would be to put the Emerald down, and run off before someone came....

Put it down? Why would he do that? And why was his spine tingling?

The Emerald was having a dangerous effect on him. He should let it go...

No, he couldn't. What if he lost it?

Shirou suddenly became aware that he was at war with himself. He also became aware of the Boundary Field suddenly covering the area. It wasn't much- just enough to make sure anyone on the outside stayed out.

"I must say, this is so frustrating," A woman's voice said, "But I suppose it's the Prana from an alternate universe that is to blame."

Shirou heard footsteps, and saw a figure step into his line of sight. She wore a cloak with a hood that covered the top of her head. Only that was lower than her eyes were visible. Shirou realized that his Command Seals were warm, which meant only one thing. And having seen or heard about the other Servants, he knew exactly who stood before him.

Caster's lips curved into an unpleasant smile. "Give me the Chaos Emerald, please."

Shirou tightened his grip on the jewel. "And if I don't?" He didn't bother questioning how Caster knew what it was.

Caster chuckled, and not in a good way. "Oh, do you really have to ask?" She held up her hand, which was already glowing with an unearthly light. " **Machia Hecatia Graea** "

Shirou was already in motion as dozens of beams, each the width of a telephone pole, shot towards him...

What am I doing? Archer thought. He was keeping a lookout as always, but now found his mind wandering. Ever since Sonic and his friends (and enemies) showed up, everything Archer had planned for spiraled out of control.

At first, the plan was simple; Wait until an opportunity rose, then use his Independent Action to kill his younger self in the hopes that the time paradox would erase his existence completely. Archer knew that if he didn't, he would grow up naively believing in the path of a hero. That path would lead him to making a contract with Gaia, the spirit of the world, and becoming a Counter Guardian, in order to save innocent lives from a disaster. At the time, it seemed like a good idea. After all, a Counter Guardian was someone who fought to protect the world.

Unfortunately, the greatest threats to humanity were *humans themselves*. Archer found himself being summoned to key points in time, with no purpose other than to massacre the people there. It only took a few of these genocides for Archer to realize that at the rate he was going, he'd be killing more people than he saved. It would all add up eventually. Archer couldn't take it anymore. And every time he saw Shirou, he would be reminded of the foolish idealism that led to his never-ending hell.

Then Sonic showed up, and Shirou latched onto him like a little kid who just met Santa Claus. And why not? Shirou's dream of being a hero had never been taken seriously, not even by close friends. But now there were people who not only applauded the Emiya Mage's aspirations, but were willing to give real advice. During meetings between the two Master teams and friends, Sonic would constantly

put in his own two cents, calling upon past experiences. And Shirou would always ask for more, like a good student hoping to learn from the teacher.

Archer couldn't help but feel a bit jealous. He had never met anyone like in *his* life.

The sound of helicopter blades spinning pulled Archers attention. He then heard Omochao's voice say, "Press A twice to do a Homing Shot!"

Confused, Archer went out to the front where Rin had insisted the little toy stay. After setting off its motion sensors for the fifth time, she decided that as master of the house the annoying machine would "stand guard" on the front porch.

Rin didn't tell me the Boundary Field had been triggered, so it must be another probe, Archer thought, From the sound of things, she didn't hear Omochao. Good, maybe I can Analyze it without her watching...

But when Archer arrived, he didn't see anything. Just Omochao bobbing in the air. No footprints, no treads, no sign that anything had been out front. Archer didn't like it. *Something* had set off the robot, but there was nothing there. Not even Archers finely tuned senses could detect...

Archer ran back into the mansion as fast as his legs could carry him. He didn't stop until he reached where Tails plugged in the Miles Electric. Turning the device on, Archer accessed the Energy Radar and began to punch in commands. It didn't take long for him to find what he was looking.

Outside, Rin had finally- After much protest- relented and agreed to let Tails outside. They had just gotten word that Sonic had been pinned down by Lancer. It was agreed that if the normally pragmatic Servant (by his Masters command) was being reckless, then they

would have to be too. While Tails would go meet Shirou at the high school, she and Archer would back Sonic up. It was a risky approach, but, like before at Eggman's public assault, their options were limited.

"...And whatever you do, don't mess with the GPS settings," Tails was saying as he fiddled with Rin's wrist, "I've got them locked onto Sonic's location. Just go where the arrow's pointing."

Rin looked at the arrow that appeared on the communicator's screen. The Mage within her would have preferred a mystical solution, but the very desperate person with limited time was grateful for the shortcut. It was a conflict that started the minute she let Tails set up shop.

"...And if you need to call us for anything, *don't* ," Tails instructed firmly, "No offense, but you kinda stink at electronics."

"No I don't." Rin denied falsely.

"It took you five minutes to figure out how to turn the Miles Electronic on." Tails deadpanned.

"That doesn't count. It's technology from another dimension." Rin defended.

"Right," Tails nodded with half-closed eyelids, "That's why you should let Archer push the buttons from now on-"

" *Don't move!* " Archer screamed from back door.

Rin and Tails jumped. Before their feet had even left the ground, Archer had Projected a bow and fired a sword directly at them. It connected with *something* no more than a foot away from his apparent targets, creating a small explosion. Within the smoke, a figure wielding a katana could be seen.

"Well, that was unexpected," Assassin said casually, lowering his blade. "I guess I should have been more mindful of those strange devices, hmm?"

"Assassin." Archer growled, half stunned. The samurai had never left the Temple Gate in his own timeline. This was one more change caused by Sonic and company appearing, he knew it. Without stopping to give an explanation, Archer charged at Assassin, Projecting his swords. He bore down on the invading Servant, only to have his blows effortlessly parried.

Archer didn't want to admit it, but he was worried. Part of the reason why he, a typically weak Servant, had been able to fight so strongly against heavy-hitters like Berserker and Lancer was that he had already seen them fight, from his younger self's perspective. Even if it had all been a blur at the time, Archer's recreation abilities allowed him to, in time, work out how they fought. And the knowledge empowered him.

Assassin, on the other hand, was a different story. During Archer's Grail War, the samurai had been forced to remain at the Ryuudou Temple Gate by his Master, away from most of the War. As far as Archer knew, Assassin had only fought once against Saber, and unfortunately, his younger self had only arrived in time to witness the end of their duel. But from what Saber had said at the time, in that time, was that Assassin was an uncommonly skilled swordsman. Had it not been for the stairs they fought on, the samurai may have triumphed over the knight.

"Assassin? The guy from the Temple?" Tails asked from the air. He was in "Copter-mode" and was airlifting Rin from the danger zone. "How'd he get here without triggering your force field? He's not a robot!"

"That's the Assassin-class' True Concealment skill," Rin explained. She began to dig through her pouch- not easy to do while being lifted by her shoulders. "Assassins can make themselves completely

unnoticeable. That's their only advantage- Not even Masters can sense their presence when it's active."

Tails gulped. "A magic ghost that can make itself *super* -invisible? That's horrible!"

"Luckily, Assassins are meant to send against other Masters," Rin stated, "Compared to the other classes, they're not that powerful."

Tails looked at the battle taking place. "He's doing pretty well against Archer."

Archer heard that remark. He also heard Rin's exposition on the fortitude of the Assassin-class. Naturally, he felt a little embarrassed that he hadn't ended the battle sooner. But Assassin was very skilled at diverting and misdirecting Archer's swords. This was a fight that would not that he could win quickly. However, he had his own questions.

"I'm surprised your Master let you leave your post," Archer said during a brief separation, "I was under the impression that you chained to that gate."

Assassin smirked. "Don't mistake incompetence for malice, Archer. My Master normally wouldn't have the power to let me leave the Ryuudou Temple's leylines, but she's recently come into some...very useful charms to compensate," He held up a hand, showing a gold ring around his middle finger. "I'm sure you're already familiar with their beauty?"

Archer gritted his teeth. Power Rings! So that was it. Of *course* the other Masters would eventually figure out how the elements from Sonic's world could benefit them. Even if they didn't reach the end of the Special Zone, they would still have the Rings.

Before the battle could go any further, Assassin vanished. Archer was confused- but ceased to be when he had to block a *Gandre*

shot. Rin was no longer being held up, and Tails was no longer in sight.

"He's circling behind you!" Tails' voice shouted from behind, " *Four o'clock!* "

Archer whirled about and felt steel meet steel. Assassin was there, looking a little annoyed. Out of the corner of his eye, Archer saw Tails, wearing a pair of goggles. He recognized them as the improvised infrared goggles Tails had made earlier.

"Tails, throw those to me!" Archer yelled, breaking away from Assassin. He caught the goggles in his hand and quickly put them on. He was immediately impressed. The computerized readout not only show much Prana Assassin's body contained (Tails had used one of Jin's familiars as a unit of measurement), but it also shown the Servant's body temperature (Higher than the average human, naturally), the outdoor temperature, what direction Archer was standing in, and the local time.

"So *that's* what those do..." Assassin noted with a voice full of comprehension. He didn't sound very upset that his one real advantage had been taken away. If anything, he was pleased to have figured it out.

Archer didn't like it. Then again, as far he could recall, the samurai Servant had always been rather chipper and affable. Still, the instincts for danger that he had spent years developing and honing were buzzing like a cell phone during a movie.

"What are you going to do now, Assassin?" Rin asked, preparing to fire another Gem. "Your class was never meant to fight other Servants head-on. How do you intend on completing your mission outnumbered?"

Of course, even the weakest Servant was still in a class beyond any human being, normally. Tails and Rin would be hard pressed to seriously back Archer up. But Rin believed her words would draw

Assassin's attention, giving her Servant the opening he needed to end the fight.

But Assassin just laughed. Reaching into his robes, he pulled out what looked a keychain. It was glowing, and had transparent rune floating above it.

That looks like one of the charms the Temple sells during festivals. Rin and Archer thought simultaneously.

"Before sending me here, my Master had this prepared," Assassin explained, "She'll be a bit upset that I had to use it, however."

"What does it do?" Tails asked cautiously. He was dancing on his toes, clearly prepared to move when the situation called for it.

Assassin frowned. "You know, I'm not sure. Let's find out!"

Assassin threw the charm into the ground. The minute the trinket made contact with the earth, Rin and Archer felt a powerful burst of Magecraft being invoked. Barely a second passed when the ground began to shake. Out from the soil and grass came dozens of skeletons, clawing their way onto the surface like a horde of stop-motion characters. Before long the entire back yard was full of animated bones. The rattling was deafening.

Assassin raised an eyebrow. "Oh. That's disappointing," He looked at Tails, whose namesake appendages were stiff and sticking straight out in shock. "I was expecting something a bit more."

One skeleton lunged at Tails, who regained his wits in time to duck away. He briefly curled into a Spin Dash and plowed through several more skeletons. Bones flew into the air, only to reassemble themselves once they landed on the ground.

"Aww, man! They're pulling together like in video games!" Tails ground, stopping by Jin's side.

"In video games?" Rin asked, taking a fighting stance. She couldn't waist all of Gems on the skeletons. "Haven't you fought these sorts of things in real life?"

"No, Knuckles is the one who usually deals with spooky stuff."

There's something spooky going on in this town, Knuckles thought, punching some sort of mutant starfish into a gooey paste. I'd bet my left fist on it.

The day had been going relatively well for the Echidna. He had gotten up early, had a good breakfast (That Issei kid wasn't so bad in the kitchen) and gotten to work on his search for the Chaos Emeralds. While the repeated disruptive signals were annoying, Knuckles had learned to ignore them. For now, he already knew the location of one Emerald. His plan was to go into the Special Zone and retrieve it yesterday had hit a snag when someone else had snuck inside and used up the gate's power. Hopefully, they had not reached the end and gotten the Emerald. Knuckles would find out if the Special Zone entrance reappeared.

But on his way, he had gotten jumped by the aforementioned starfish monsters. They weren't particularly strong, but what they lacked in obvious threat they made up with sheer tenacity. Luckily, they were more focused on going after him than any of the screaming bystanders who happened to wander by.

What the heck are these things? Knuckles thought, wiping his fist on a wall. *They're like Dark Gaia monsters, only uglier and full of juice. Eww.*

As Knuckles pondered, he something out of the corner of his eye. It was young woman, with tied up blond hair in a blue dress and white hair. There was something about her dimenior that was was something unusual about her, he could tell...

And she seemed to be in a hurry.

Knuckles felt torn. Part of him, most of him, wanted to go check out the Special Zone and bring the Chaos Emerald back to the Temple. However, there was a small, nagging component of his grey matter that kept trying to say that the blond girl was important somehow.

Grrr, this is going to keep me up at night. Knuckles thought, chasing after the blonde. *Where the heck is she running to?*

Shirou panted, sweat running down his brow. So far, he had successfully either avoided or blocked Caster's attacks, mostly by Projecting the *Atlas* as Archer did. However, it would only be a matter of time before Caster decided to get serious. It was plainly obvious that she was just toying with Shirou, clearly enjoying his exhaustion. Or maybe she wasn't as powerful as that, but was a terrific actor. Whatever was going on, Shirou realized that his own life would run out before Caster's patience. This was a stalemate with a burning fuse.

Drawing energy from the Chaos Emerald was out, too. Shirou had the unnerving feeling that pulling Prana from the jewel would be like putting a hole in a dam; too much would come out at once and destroy where it led, which in Shirou's case would lead to another "Swords exploding from the body" scenario.

Yeah, Shirou did *not* want that happening again.

There was only one way to solve this problem. And he could only do it three times. He had to make it count.

Caster saw Shirou lift his hand. Underneath her hood, her eyes gleamed.

"Saber, by the power of the Command Seal..." Shirou shouted as the marks began to glow. "*I order you to my side!*"

There was a bright flash of light. There was *another* flash of light. A beam fired from Caster's hands flew across the courtyard, only to be

knocked into the air. Standing before Shirou was Saber. She was clad in her armor, had her sword out, and stood resolutely against the attacking Servant.

"My, my, the Servant Saber," Caster purred, nonplussed by how easily her attack was stopped. "I was wondering when you would arrive."

Saber did not respond. However, her eyes burned with a message that was all too clear. As she glared daggers into the enchanting Servant, she said in hushed tones to Shirou, "Are you unhurt, Shirou?"

"Feeling better," Shirou said, once more feeling a small trace of vitality return to him. "I was able to block and dodge most of her attacks. I think she was trying prolong the battle, for some reason..."

That didn't make any sense. The fastest way to eliminate a rival Servant was to kill their Master. Why would Caster purposely delay herself of such a an easy victory? This had the stench of a plot. Saber narrowed her eyes, trying to determine Caster's scheme.

Caster shivered. "Ahhh, that fierce gaze on a such a cute face...it's to *die for!* "

Saber grimaced. Or, more likely, this Caster was certifiably nuts. The last one certainly was.

Caster unleashed another beam of light. Instead of dodging or even deflecting it, Saber just stood resolutely, acting as a wall to shield her Master. The ray of Mana just washed over her. Shirou's eyes widened in shock. While he had known from the outset that his Servant had something called a Dragon-Affinity which granted her a high magic resistance, seeing it in action was a sight to behold.

Saber charged through the onslaught undeterred, and slashed at Caster once she was close enough. Before Excalibur could connect,

Caster teleported away. The pressure from Saber's slash created a wind that put a sizable crack in one of the school walls.

Caster reappeared several yards away. While she didn't appear harmed, her normal confidence-bordering-on-arrogance had clearly developed a crack. Her hood being flipped over to show her sweating face was a big indicator.

"I see that winning you over will not be such an easy feat," Caster murmured, "So good that I came prepared."

Both Shirou and Saber felt the ground crackle, infused with Prana. At first, Shirou thought it was the work of those strange marks he had found the day he met Rider. But that power had been terrible, evil, with a feeling of decay. This felt different...

Before Shirou could think more, dozens of twisted skeletons burst from the ground. It wasn't long before the entire school looked like the cover of a heavy metal album. However, while Shirou was unnerved by the event, Saber remained unmoved. This wasn't the first time a Caster had tried to prevail by means of a summons. And thankfully, compared to the vile familiars of Bluebeard, these skeletons were a much fainter presence. They lacked the unnatural malice and taint those demons bore. However, there was something about the battlefield that still made Saber uneasy.

Am I still worried about Shirou, Saber thought, Or is there something else to Caster's tactics that I'm missing?

The best course of action would be to take Shirou and retreat...but a shimmer in the air told Saber that doing so would be impossible. Caster had set up a Boundary Field, and the knight sensed that it did more than repel.

It was a kind that entrapped.

So, she has no intention of letting us go, Saber realized, Which means the fastest way to save Shirou is to destroy the source of

Prana!

With a burst of Prana, Saber threw herself once more at Caster...

"What the heck!? Where'd she go!?" Knuckles yelled, running out in the streets. His presence caused a stir as shocked people stared at the Echidna running in the street. While Knuckles had initially stayed out of sight while he trailed Saber, her vanishing act had caused him to lose his caution.

Grumbling, Knuckles stopped and looked around. His senses were now prickling, and he felt a strange disturbance in air.

And it was coming from the direction of the high school.

Kirie Kotomine did not walk. He did not run. He *strode*, with purpose, without acknowledging the world around him. Only the most analytical eye, with extension foreknowledge on his subject, would be able to tell that the priest was in a hurry.

Kirie was not used to losing control of a situation. It rarely happened. In his entire life, succeeding in whatever his chosen task had simply been a matter of course. The only time he had truly failed at anything was when Emiya Kiritsugu killed him during the Fourth War...and even that had been undone by the Holy Grails blessing.

Sonic, on the other hand, was an entirely different matter. Ever since he appeared, Kirie 's life had become a series of burdens. The blue blur's heroic tendencies, combined with a total lack of fear, meant that Kirie had to spend every waking moment trying to cover up everything Sonic or one of his friends did in public. While he had help from the Church and the Mages Association, coordinating two groups with different interests was a chore Kirie was not fond of. Just yesterday, he had to infiltrate a military base in order to arrange a tasteful editing of one pilot's report. Just getting in unnoticed had been a hassle. Even more troubling was the talk of sending agents-

either Enforcers from the Association, or worse, Executioners from the Churches Burial Agency. In order for either group to operate in Fuyuki, they would need the cooperation of the Overseer. If that happened, someone might find the hidden room he had prepared for Gilgamesh. And even the most coldblooded, stonehearted Mage would be put off by a crypt full of living corpses that used to be survivors of the Fire that had their Mana drained every day.

(Well, Zouken's wouldn't, but that only made it worse.)

All in all, this had to stop. Kirie had put a lot of planning into this Grails War, and he wasn't going to have everything he spent ten years preparing for be upended by band of super-powered mascot characters. Luckily, he already knew where most of the so-called tanukis were hiding. According to air force reports and Lancer's observations, the *kitsune* called Tails was most likely being kept by Rin. It would be no problem retrieving the fluffy little ace pilot and handing him over to the Association. The red *tanuki* Lancer encountered would be a trifle more difficult to capture, if only because it may have fallen under Caster's control. Why she didn't turn that one in for a Command Seal eluded Kirie. The real trick was Sonic. He had long figured out that the Hedgehog was being given sanctuary by young Emiya. Unfortunately, Sonic tended to either vacate the premises and Fuyuki itself for hours on end, or stayed within its boundaries with Saber. Gilgamesh had made it clear that Lancer was not to attack the knight until he decided it was time. And one did not ignore the King of Heroes' commands lightly.

Therefore, it was imperative that Kirie kill Sonic *now*, while Lancer had him contained. It would be difficult- Sonic was fast and skilled enough to fight Servants equally -but Kirie has once been an agent of the burial society.

He would be enough to turn the tide.

" Gae -"

POW!

Lancer blocked Sonic's Homing Shot with his Spears handle. The Hedgehog, once deflected, would circle around in a new attempt to take Lancer's back. And from there Lancer would try to skewer It was in that pattern that the battle had fallen into. They were at a stalemate, and both of them knew it. Sonic, however, wanted nothing more than to ditch the Servant hounding him and go help his friends. Unfortunately, whenever he saw an opening to break free of the duel, that would also be an opening for Lancer to use his Noble Phantasm- and Sonic would be forced to go back and keep Lancer from completing the spell.

I need to find a way out of this and get to Tails, Sonic thought, wiping his chin. I can't wait for him to start firing blanks...No idea how many of those 'Time Spears' he has left!

Before Sonic could think up or put a plan into motion, something sharp rimmed into his side. Yelling in pain, Sonic stumbled as his Rings scattered from his body. For one horrible moment, Sonic thought Lancer would be on him to finish the job- but the spear didn't come. As he scrambled to grab as many Rings as he could before they vanished, Sonic saw that Lancer looked upset.

"What the Hell are you doing?" The Spearman said in a controlled but clearly angry voice, " I didn't ask for your help!"

"I mean no disrespect, but the situation's resolution is far more pressing then your personal grudges." A deep voice said *smoothly* . It had come from the same direction as the knife.

Sonic looked and saw the unwanted reinforcement. He had seen that man before, on a photograph at Rings mansion. It was the so-called Overseer of the Holy Grails War. The guy who basically put a hit on Sonic and his friends just for helping those in need.

Kirie Kotomine.

He's here only a minute and I already wanna punch his face in.
Sonic thought, When He realized something. "Wait a minute! You're Lancer's Master?!"

Kirie didn't bat an eye. "I am afraid you are mistaken," The priest said, "I am the Overseer of this War, as appointed by the Holy Church," He gave a bow that was entirely devoid of anything, save sarcasm. "My name is Kirie Kotomine."

I'll bet, Sonic thought, not believing it for a minute. Aloud, he asked, "If you and Lancer aren't a team, why help him? You're supposed to be impartial, right?"

"That is true," Kirie conceded, "However, I have other duties to perform. Chief among those is maintaining the secrecy of Magecraft. Which requires, unfortunately for you, eliminating those whose actions risk exposure."

"Y'know, I've wondered what kinda church would help evil wizards or whatever hide," Sonic said, reaching into his left glove. "Shouldn't you be all 'Burn the witch' and stuff?"

Kirie chuckled mirthlessly. "It seems you underestimate the tenacious state of affairs that hold this world together."

Kirie launched into a lecture on the now delicate rivalry between the Holy Church and Mages Association. He spoke of how the Church became involved in the Holy War, as they could not allow the term Holy Grails be used so frivolously. And Sonic ignored every word. He had already heard this history lesson from Shirou and Rin. Kirie wasn't telling him anything new. What he needed right now was a way out this situation.

Instead, Sonic pulled out the cell phone and did a systems check. Looks like the Boundary Field Lancer set up didn't stop the service. *Good* . And all of the jumping and running around didn't damage the camera. And, oh, look at that, it even had email.

Now we're getting somewhere, Sonic thought as he hatched a plan. And it looks like motor mouth is starting to wind down. Good, this is already taking too long.

"...Do you understand our position?" Kirie finished rhetorically.

"Sure do," Sonic replied, spinning the phone in his hand like a baton. "You care more about covering your own butt than the people getting killed by this stupid war!"

Sonic was off like shot, and Kirie was ready. Or more specifically, Lancer was ready, and blocked Sonic's assault with husband spear, putting the handle between Hedgehog and priest. Kirie planned to follow up with his own martial arts, killing Sonic with a few well-timed strikes.

But Sonic suddenly jumped, and as he sailed over their heads, something went *click-click-click*. Landing on their other side, he examined the photos he took on the phones screen. The evil grin that sprouted gave Kirie a horrible premonition.

"Not bad! The camera loves you guys," Sonic chuckled, and held out the phone. It had a candidate image of Kirie and Lancer. "And I'll bet the cops'll love this too."

"What you saying?" Kirie asked tensely.

Sonic gave the priest a level glare. "I'm saying that if you don't have Lancer back off and let me help my friends, I'll hit the 'Send to all' and show the world what good friends you guys are."

"And you think that a single picture will expose anything?" Kirie asked, forcing himself to sound unimpressed. While a hierarchical Mage wouldn't have understood the full extent of what Sonic was threatening, the priest did. He sent out a mental command to Lancer to steal the phone, but to his shock the Servant did not react. He tried a bluff. "Please, don't insult me with such a baseless threat. But, if you truly feel the need to barter, perhaps you can accompany

me to the church. We can hide you and your friends if need be." At least, hide their bodies...

But Sonic just laughed. "Sorry, but this offer is non-negotiable. And don't worry, this episode of Candid Camera won't expose magic- just the fact the local bishop is in cahoots with the 'Spear-weilding Murderer.'"

Damn him! Ten years ago, Kirie had been a suspect for the murder of Tohsakah Tokiomi. The chaos caused by the Great Fire had put the investigation on the backburner. Some bribes and applied hypnosis had caused the matter to be dropped entirely. However, if Sonic made good on his threat, it would be the beginning of the end- With all of the mayhem caused by Eggman, if Kirie was fingered for anything, both the Church and Mages Association would have him removed, peacefully or not, in order to cover up what was happening in Fuyuki.

Kirie couldn't afford to let that happen to him. And Sonic knew it.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I've gotta catch up with my buds," Sonic said, turning on his heels. "Catch ya on the flip side!"

A cloud of dust was all that remained as Sonic ran off. Kirie just stood there, grinding his teeth. He hadn't expected someone who acted so happy-go-lucky to pull out such a cutthroat tactic. It was the kind of thing Emiya Kiritsugu would do, equal parts pragmatic and reckless. And it

"He got you good, Father," Lancer said, using Kirie 's formal title in case another Master or Servant was watching. Better to uphold the illusion for now. "I guess we're backing off for now."

"Why didn't you take his phone?" Kirie hissed, infuriated by Lancer's gentle mocking.

Lancer shrugged. "He's faster than me. Yeah, I know I'm supposed to be the fastest Servant, but Sonic's in a class of his own. If I made

a grab for it, he could have hit the send button..." He paused.
"Where'd he get that, anyway? If he went into a store, you would have heard about it, right?"

Kirie didn't answer. He knew damn well where Sonic had gotten that phone. In fact, Kirie had bought it several months ago for Rin's birthday. It had been a joke at the time. He knew that Rin would never touch anything more complicated than a calculator. However, the expression his ward had made when she received it was well worth the expense. Never in his life had Kirie ever expected his little joke to backfire on him in such a way.

Rin, you and I are going to have words when we next meet. The priest thought darkly.

Rin yelled something. It was hard to understand over the constant din of clattering bones, clashing swords, and other violent noises, but as she roundhouse kicked one skeleton into another, it's meaning was clear. Perhaps.

Glad she's having fun, Archer thought as he parried Assassin's sword over and over, *Too bad he is too.*

And Assassin was clearly enjoying himself. Archer hated it, and for one important reason; the samurai was the better swordsman. Archer had the feeling that if Assassin really wanted to, he could have killed the bowman very early in their clash. Of course, Archer had no intention to continually fighting on Assassin's terms. Whenever possible, he would break free and try to snipe Assassin with an Overloaded sword. Unfortunately, Assassin was just as good as deflecting the projectiles as he was with regular blows.

"I must admit, you are a very peculiar Heroic Spirit," Assassin noted as they fought, "All of these swords, yet it feels as if none are truly your own. Could you be a false Servant, like myself?"

"False?" Archer repeated, a bit confused. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the propellor for the *Tornado* begin to turn.

Assassin broke away from Archer. "Sasaki Kojirou never existed. I myself have no true name, the only thing I ever possessed was a skill with the sword. For all of her power, my Master couldn't summon a proper Servant, and instead had to satisfy herself with a fake like me."

"A fake. Yeah, I guess we're similar in that regard, at least," Archer muttered, while thinking on Assassin's words. *'Her'. So, his Master really is a woman. Unless he's lying...*

"In fact, until very recently, I was stuck at the temple because she couldn't be bothered to share her Mana with me," Assassin continued as he and Archer circled each other, "For a wandering swordsman like myself, being trapped in a single place was like a very cold Hell."

"Don't tell me," Archer interrupted, "You're Master found some of those Power Rings and used them to fuel your actions?"

Assassin smirked. "When life gives you lemons, you know."

They clashed again. After a minute of thrusts, parries, slices, and blocks, the two Servants broke apart.

"I truly am grateful to meet such a skilled opponent," Assassin complimented, "So, as a token of my thanks, I would like to show you something special. It's a technique that I've spent my whole life developing.

" *Tsubame Gaeshi!* "

Assassin's sword began to move, but something about it made Archer's eyes water. It seemed to bend in ways that his mind told him were impossible. It was as if he was making strikes in multiple directions at the same time. But that was... *impossible*.

Before Assassin could finish his attack, he jumped aside and the ground he was on exploded. Archer looked up and saw that the *Tornado* no longer where it had been before. While it hadn't taken off, the biplane had apparently wheeled its way around the yard until its nose was pointed at the duel. Archer could see a trail of smoke wafting out from beneath the aircraft, and a fluffy pilot in the cockpit.

"Test of weapons system complete!" Tails yelled, "Rin, hit the dirt and don't get up until the noise stops!"

Archer smirked. So *that's* where Tails had gotten to. In all of the confusion, he had lost track of the Fox. Pretty clever of him. And rather than waste time with another attempt to blast Assassin, Tails steered the *Tornado* around, mowing down the skeletons with its guns. Rin, seeing what was happening, wisely followed Tails' advice and put herself as low to the ground as bad Assassin was nimble enough to avoid the missile.

The Servant in question wasn't very pleased, if his expression was any indication. No doubt he didn't like having his fight with Archer interrupted.

Well, tough cookies, Archer thought bitterly, *If wanted a proper duel he should have rented a stadium.*

"I suppose this is your victory for now," Assassin sighed, sheathing his sword. "It would have been nice to see this battle to the end." And with that, he turned and ran off.

"Are you giving up?" Archer yelled, chasing after him. "That's hardly honorable, isn't it?"

"I'm simply at my limit," Assassin called back, "My Master instructed me to fight you, but I'm not going to die pointlessly, especially for such a duplicitous woman. But I think I've served her ends enough for today."

With that, Assassin vanished from sight, once more using his True Concealment to hide from Archer's vision. The bowman scowled, knowing that it was pointless to search for the samurai. Turning around, he went back to help Tails and Rin finish clearing out the skeletons. Thankfully, whatever Magecraft Assassin used to summon them was starting to run out. Fewer and fewer were reconstructing themselves. And without Assassin to worry about, destroying them was less a fight for survival and more of a chore. The ease gave Archer time to think on Assassin's words.

Served her ends enough... it was clear that Assassin had no true loyalty to his Master, whoever they were (The odds of it being Kazuki- *sensei* 's fiancée increased with the usage of "her"). That might have explained why Assassin had been invested in winning the battle. But how could just fightin serve any ends?

"Whoa! Looks like a heavy metal album exploded here!"

Sonic the Hedgehog had arrived. Fashionably late, apparently.

"Sonic! Are you okay?" Tails asked, flying out of the cockpit. "What happened with Lancer?"

"He and his Master tried to double-team me, but I managed to outsmart them," Sonic said, looking around. "Looks like you guys made out okay."

"No, we didn't," Rin growled, pulling a bone that had gotten tangled in one of her pigtails free. "Assassin attacked us and got away before we could finish him off."

"Assassin? You mean the guy at the temple?" Sonic asked, "I didn't know he had skeletons in his closet."

"Would you stop the bad jokes, this is serious!" Rin snarled, her patience at the brinkin point. "I think this attack was a delaying tactic. Assassin's Master wanted to keep us from getting to Emiya-*kun*. "

Sonic hummed, and turned on his communicator. "Yo, Shirou! You doin' all right?" No response. "Uh oh. Tails, keep that propellor spinning!"

Technically, Shirou wasn't in any immediate danger. He just didn't hear his communicator beep. Granted, it would have been hard to hear anything over the sounds of bones rattling and getting smashed to pieces, magically-invoked laser beams firing, and his own Servant yelling battle cries as she smashed skeletons to pieces. Meanwhile, Caster teleported around, trying to blast Saber or Shirou with her offensive Magecraft. It may have worked, except Saber's instincts allowed her to counter any assaults, and she never strayed far from her Master. While there were those felt 'immediate danger' should include being caught up in a ferocious battle between Heroic Spirits from bygone eras, in truth Shirou felt relatively at ease. He wasn't going to let his guard down any time soon, but nor was he going to panic. The fight had fallen into a steady rhythm.

But we can't do this forever, Shirou thought, dodging one skeleton before crushing it with a Projected Kansho. My and Saber's Prana are going to run out eventually. Is Caster's plan to try to exhaust us? But she runs the risk of draining herself as well that way. All of this Magecraft can't be easy to fuel.

And apparently it wasn't. Soon enough, the mob of skeletons began to thin out, until there was very little between Saber and Caster. Both ladies were clearly exhausted, but neither were willing to show the other any weakness.

"What is the meaning of this, Caster?" Saber asked, "Are you giving up?"

"Hardly," Caster sneered, "You were having so much trouble that I decided to be generous. If you want, I'll even continue this duel with my eyes closed."

Saber narrowed her eyes. It was clear that Caster was baiting her, but the knight's patience was ebbing. She needed to end this battle *now*. If Caster was going to be so careless as to leave herself open, then she could not wait to decipher the witch's intentions. Trusting in her natural immunity to Magecraft to protect her, Saber charged at her foe. Caster fired another beam, but when Saber batted it aside, she fell to the ground and her knees.

"Oh...oh, please! Don't!" Caster whimpered, holding up her hands in fright. "I'm sorry! Just don't hurt me!"

The witch's tone had gone from haughty to terrified so rapidly that it threw Saber off her game. The blond Servant halted her advance so quickly that her feet caused a screech as she pushed them against the ground. Sword still held over her head, Saber tried to determine where the trap was.

And then something red fell on her.

If there was one trick that Knuckles prided himself on, it was his gliding. Of course, calling it a mere trick insulted the skill he had developed during those years on Angel Island. By spreading out his quills *just so*, Knuckles could catch air currents soar through the sky like the world's toughest paper airplane with spiked fists. Although it lacked the means of elevation like Tails' 'copter-mode', (unless he hit and updraft) it was much faster, allowing Knuckles to cover more ground if he jumped from a high enough point. And when Saber vanished, he did just that. After sensing the mysterious forces building up at the school, Knuckles scaled the nearest building and once at the top, took off to ride the skies. He could have sworn that he heard some shouts about a UFO, but didn't see anything else in the air.

Nearing Homurahara Academy, Knuckles didn't so much as see the mystical field surrounding the campus as he sensed it. Defining how the sixth sense worked was tricky. However, once he got close enough, he could make out some kind of battlefield. A red-haired

teenager was standing in the center of what looked like a giant collection of bones. A small distance away from the youth two more figures were together, a blond standing over-

Knuckles felt his heart leap into his throat. It was Ms. Caster! He would recognize that that purple hood anywhere. And it looked like she was being threatened!

Without another thought (As typically for him in these situations), Knuckles narrowed his quills and went into a nosedive- fist first. He was moving so quickly that Caster's attacker didn't have time to react when Knuckles made his presence known by means of a right hook.

Saber felt the blow and did her best to roll with the punch, the impact did send her back quite a few feet. She recovered quick enough, only to be stunned again when she saw who had blindsided her. "You!"

From his spot, Shirou's recognized Knuckles immediately from the pictures Tails had saved on his Miles Electric. He also figured out what was going on, and even if he hadn't, the first words out of Knuckles would have cleared up the matter.

"Back off, shorty!" Knuckles shouted, "There's no way I'm letting you hurt Ms. Caster!"

"Oh! My hero!" Caster said

Shirou groaned. Of *course* Knuckles would think Saber was the enemy and Caster was just an innocent victim. And that would explain why Caster had surrounded to Saber so readily. She must have sensed Knuckles coming and was putting on a show to manipulate him into attacking the knight.

I've got to call Sonic and have him clear this up! Shirou thought, and looked to his wrist. To his horror, he saw that the communicator was broken. It must have been damaged while Shirou was fending off Caster.

"Back away, you fool!" Saber shouted, trying to get around Knuckles. And while she was faster than an ordinary human, Knuckles was able to keep up and and put himself between knight and witch.

" *You* back off!" Knuckles yelled, following up with a left jab. Unbeknownst to him, Caster was unable to hide her smile. Nor did either fighter notice her reaching into her cloak...

"Knuckles, stop!" Shirou yelled, running towards the fight.

Thankfully, Knuckles did. "Huh?" He asked, looking away from Saber. "How'd you know my name?"

"We're friends with Sonic the Hedgehog," Shirou explained, panting. "Please listen to me. We're *not* your enemies."

"If you're not enemies, then why are you attacking an innocent woman?" Knuckles demanded.

"That's just...a misunderstanding," Shirou said awkwardly, "Look, just calm down. Sonic's been staying at my house and told me about your world. Look," He held out the Emerald. "I found this so you guys can get home. We want to help you."

Knuckles didn't look convinced. "Oh yeah?" He asked, "Well, if you and Sonic are friends, then prove it."

"Prove it?" Shirou repeated questioningly.

"Yeah, tell me something that only Sonic would know," Knuckles challenged, "If you can."

Shirou racked his brains, trying to recall one the anecdotes Sonic had given. "Er...wasn't there one time when you got your head stuck in a drain pipe and..."

"Stop!" Knuckles yelled, waving his hands. "I believe you. That blabbermouth! I told him not to tell anyone else about that!"

Shirou allowed himself a faint smile. Things were finally looking up. All they had to do now was explain their battle against Caster....

Wait. Where was Caster? Shirou felt a chill when he realized that the spot where he had last saw the witch was empty.

" *Rulebreaker!* "

Both Shirou and Knuckles looked to where Saber was. Crouched before the Knights side was Caster. In the witch 's hands was a dagger with a crooked blade. The tip of which was being jammed into Saber. And while it didn't seem like the knife was actually piercing the flesh, the blond Servant looked stunned for some reason. Was she just shocked that Caster had caught her off guard?

Before anyone could ponder more, things began to happen. One of the skeletons, lying limply on the ground, came to life. It sprang into the air, and snatched the Chaos Emerald out of Shirou's hands by its teeth.

Shirou paled. "No-!"

Knuckles' became a red blur. He plowed into the skeleton, smashing it to pieces. But as most of its bones cluttered onto the ground, the skull, with the Emerald still lodged firmly in its mouth, flew though the air-

-and into Caster's hand. Then the skull crumbled away, and the red glow of the Emerald seemed to flow out and cover Caster's body. The witch let out an almost sensual moan and held up her other hand. Shirou saw that unlike before, the back of that hand had marks on it. Familiar marks. With a feeling of dread, he glanced at his own hand, which was now missing his Command Seals...

And Caster said, in voice as sweet as poisoned honey, "Oh, I've got a *really* good feeling about this."

To be continued

Tiger Dojo:

Taiga: Hohhh! Welcome! You have arrived at the Tiger Dojo! I am your instructor, Fujimura Taiga! Gaoh!

Big: I'm a cat. My name's Big.

Taiga: Ehhhh!? Where's my Number One Student?

Big: She couldn't make it. Here's her note.

Taiga: *(Reading)* "My big return is in the next chapter, so I am taking this lesson off to make myself more presentable. The very cute and marketable Illya." Why, that lazy little brat! How dare she run away at such a critical moment! Well, fine! Who needs her! Substitute Number One Student! Begin the Q and A!

Big: The first question is from Thunder Dragon; "What is in the trunk that Rin is so afraid of?"

Taiga: Ah, the forbidden tool of the Tohsakah Clan... To explain, we must first talk about the Wizard Marshal, Kishur Zelretch Schweinorg. Hundreds of years ago, he took Rin's ancestor, Nagato, and trained him in the ways of magic. Since then, several of Zelretch's prized inventions have become heirlooms of the Tohsakah Clan. Among those heirlooms is a Mystic Code called the Kaleidostick, or Ruby. This Mystic Code allows its contracted wielder to access knowledge from alternate selves of parallel universes. In short, if you needed to know how to fix cars, you can use Ruby to gain the skills of a version of you that became a car mechanic!

Big: That sounds useful.

Taiga: However, Ruby is a total jerk who derives pleasures from the suffering of their user! Apparently, Rin used it once and Ruby put her in a really humiliating situation. After that, Rin locked it up in a special chest with infinite space and swore to never use it again.

Big: Oh. That sounds mean.

Taiga: But fitting! If you don't earn your power and just take shortcuts, you'll never turn out well! Now, the second question! Hmm, this one doesn't have a signer: "Are you going to bring in the Mobians' Chaos Powers like Lightspeed Attack, Sonic Wind for Sonic, or the Wisps?" Student Big, this is your speciality! Answer the question!

Big: Hmm, Sonic might do the Lightspeed Attack if he feels like it. I dunno about the wisps, tho. They're from another planet, so they might not get here in time.

Taiga: Dang, and they're so cute, too! Oh well, we are running out of time, so we must end the session. We will see you at the next practice!

Big: G'bye everyone.

Treasonous Witch

Chapter 12: *Treasonous Witch*

At a secret location, Agent Stuart was having a headache. Developing the network to monitor and gauge the amount of Chaos Energy (The mysterious element traceable through Eggman's technology, believed to be connected to the Chaos Emerald he sought) was still in the early stages when they had gotten multiple alerts. Flares of Chaos Energy had been detected at three separate locations. One was at the Tohsaka property, another had been at a street somewhere in the city, and the third was at the high school. While Stuart wanted to have the new prototype remote-controlled drones sent out to investigate, getting permission to launch the robots with offensive components was akin to beating his head against the wall. Unless they had solid proof that it was Eggman, none of his superiors were willing to allow the usage of military hardware in civilian areas. And now the CE rate at Homurahara Academy was skyrocketing.

"Agent Stuart!" Another agent ran up. "We just got word from local police. An aircraft was spotted crossing Fuyuki airspace. It matches the description of the bi-plane used by Sonic and Tails."

"Any guesses as to their intended destination?" Stuart asked.

The agent shook his head. "We can't say for certain," He began to type on a computer. "However, this is the plane's estimated trajectory."

The screen showed a map of Fuyuki. A dotted line appeared, with a little ball riding along it. Apparently, if the plane's path was straight, then it would pass over the high school.

"Have any of the drones we sent to Homurahara Academy sent back a report?" Stuart asked.

The agent looked awkward. "From what we've ascertained, when the unit arrived at the school, it was destroyed by a...skeleton."

Stuart felt another headache coming on. *First robots, now skeletons? What is happening to this city?*

"Caster, what the heck is going on here?" Knuckles called out, "What's with that knife?"

As she rose higher into the air, Caster looked down at her little pawn. She held out her Noble Phantasm for all to see. She knew that by using it, she had exposed her true identity, but the sheer rush from holding the Chaos Emerald overpowered whatever unease she had. As far as she was concerned, victory was hers. Nothing wrong with a little gloating.

"This is *Rule Breaker* ," Caster said, "It is a sword of betrayal and negation. Its power is such that it can nullify any Magecraft in the world," She smiled evilly. "Such as, the contract between Master and Servant," She directed her gaze at Shirou. "Your Servant is now mine, Emiya Shirou."

Shirou swallowed, but his throat had become so dry it was a meaningless effort. His Command Seals, the proof of his bond with Saber, were *gone*. And combined with the sight of the Chaos Emerald in her hand, Shirou began to feel a sense of hopelessness. And once more, he was at the Fire.

Knuckles didn't really understand exactly what was happening. But, while he might have been stubborn, hardheaded, and gullible, that didn't mean he was stupid. As he watched the Chaos Emerald's light surround the woman who sheltered him, he began to have that same feeling he had whenever one of Eggman's plots came to fruition. It was a little instinct called the "Darn it, I've been had!" feeling. He took a few steps forward and held out his hand.

"Okay, Caster, I don't know what's going on, but you better hand over that Chaos Emerald," Knuckles said warningly, "Its power is lot more than an ordinary person can take!"

But Caster simply chortled. The more she held the Emerald, the more she could feel its energy flowing into her. The sheer potency of it all made her giddy with confidence. There was no way she was going to let it go now!

"Oh, Knuckles, you're concern is unneeded. My skill is far greater than the low quality of mage in this era," Caster replied, "But if you really want to help me, why don't you collect more Chaos Emeralds for me? I believe you said there were...six more?"

"For you!?" Now Knuckles was getting angry. Caster's patronizing tone was working his nerves. "Now, listen here! Those Emeralds belong to me and my friends! We need them to get home!"

But Caster laughed again, making Knuckles angrier. With both Saber and the Chaos Emerald in her grasp, she had no more reason to keep up her act of a 'poor, endangered bride' around Knuckles. In fact, she felt confident enough to make another attempt at mind control. After all, now that she had a substantial piece of Knuckles' home in her possession, it was certainly worth a shot...

But before she could do anything, Caster saw the arrow coming. Holding up her hands, she released released a wave of power that blew the arrow away. Knuckles looked to where the arrow had come from and saw Shirou holding a bow.

"Oh, you're still here," Caster said dismissively, "I had almost forgotten."

Damn it... damn it! Shirou thought desperately. He had hoped that with Caster preoccupied by Knuckles, he could get a shot in and maybe kill the witch. No such luck, apparently.

Caster looked down at Saber. "Saber, as the first task for your new Master, kill that boy," She held up her hand and the stolen Command Seals began to glow. " *I order you.* "

Saber cried out in pain as the same eerie glow began to surround her body. She began to take jerky steps towards Shirou, her sword raised.

"Ne-never..." She gasped, struggling to resist the order. Her form shook as the war between her will and Caster's waged.

the witch frowned. "You would disobey your Master? For this inept boy?"

"You may have stolen his Command Seals..." Saber panted, her eyes blazing. "But you will *never be my Master!* "

A red blur rammed into Saber, knocking her down. Knuckles looked back at Shirou and yelled, "Kid, take your girlfriend and run!"

"What?" Shirou asked, stunned at the Echidna's actions.

"You heard me! Beat it!" Knuckles shouted, turning to glare at Caster. "Me and *Mizzzzz* Caster have a few things we need to work out."

The expression on Caster's face was now devoid of humor. She sighed, "I suppose if you want something done, you need to do it yourself..."

Caster's ascension increased, until she was at roughly the same height Eggman was during his attack on the school. Around her, giant circles appeared, each the size of a car, some bigger. And within these wheels were runes from a long-forgotten era.

" **Machia Hecatia Graea** "

"Uh oh." Were the words that left Knuckles' mouth. Fitting and understated they were, as beams of light began to rain down. Shirou knew in an instant that these attacks were of a much, *much* higher

strength than the ones Caster was sending out earlier. Before, she was just wearing Shirou down as part of her plan to take Saber. Now, though, Shirou had become expendable. Even if he had the Prana, there was no way his recreated Atlas shield could withstand such an assault.

But then, it turned out he needn't have worried. Before any of the rays could reach their target, something spun through the air, hitting each one and canceling them out. The weapon boomeranged around and Shirou saw that it was a stone sword.

Berserker 's sword.

The ground shook as the monstrous Servant thundered towards the battle. He caught the sword and soon stopped, taking a moment to glare at Shirou. Once the moment passed, he turned his glare up at Caster. Off to the side, Knuckles shivered at the sight of the immense being.

What IS he? Knuckles thought.

Caster found herself swallowing involuntarily. Even with Saber under her heel and the Chaos Emerald in hand, the sheer terror invoked by Berserker cut through the confidence she had built. As the son of Zeus, Herakles always had commanding presence. As a Servant summoned into the Berserker class, that aura had been twisted and magnified by the inherent rage of that class.

Even worse, during her observations, she had seen that Berserker's Master had a dark affection for Saber's Master- her ex- Master. It was clear which side she would take in the ensuing battle.

Caster returned to the ground, landing by Saber's side. "It seems that our little gathering is becoming too crowded for my liking. I'll take my leave...and my servants!"

There was a flash, and Caster was gone. But so too was Saber!

"No!" Shirou cried. Ignoring Berserker, the Mage ran over to where the Servants had been, hoping to find some trace of them. But they were gone. And he had no idea as to where.

Remembering that Knuckles and Caster had known each other, Shirou turned to the Echidna, hoping he would shed a clue- and saw he too was gone. From what Sonic had told him, and he had personally seen, Knuckles was unlikely to have fled- Caster must have taken him as well. Shirou fell to his hands and knees as he realized that not only he had lost Saber, he had also lost one of Sonic's friends as well.

" *Onii-chan*. "

Shirou looked behind. Illya, dressed for the outdoors, was walking up to him. She glanced around at the bones scattered around the courtyard.

"To think a Servant of the Caster-class would rely on Dragon Tooth Warriors," The little girl commented.

"'Dragon Tooth'?"

Illya shrugged. "As far as familiars go, they're pretty cheap. Their name comes from the dragon fangs used to create and control them," she explained, "The only troublesome thing about them is how many there are."

"Oh," Shirou stood up. "There were a lot, so that explains it..."

Illya looked around again before focusing her red eyes on Shirou. "What happened to Saber? I don't sense her, but it doesn't feel like she died."

At first, Shirou was taken back by how blunt Illya was with her words. For a moment, he was about to berate the little Master for her apparent callousness. But Berserker's presence reminded him of what had happened the first time they were at odds.

Biting back an angry retort, Shirou said, "Caster took her."

"What do you mean?" Illya asked. She saw then saw that Shirou's Command Seals were gone from his hand. "Huh? Where'd your Seals go?"

"Like I said, Caster," Shirou said unhappily, "She used her Noble Phantasm, a crooked sword called *Rule Breaker*, to steal my Command Seals. When you showed up, she teleported away and took Saber with her."

"So, that's Caster's Noble Phantasm?" Illya asked, "A sword that can warp the contract between Master and Servant?"

"According to her, it can undo other Magecraft." Shirou went on. Talking about it made him feel a little better about what had happened.

"Then she undid the pact you and Saber made, and forged a new contract by force," Illya summarized, "Only a Mage from ancient times could do high-level Magecraft like that so quickly."

"I don't think she intended for to tell anyone else," Shirou said, "If you hadn't appeared with Berserker, I might have been killed," He smiled faintly. "Thank you."

Illya smiled broadly. "Of course! You're my *Onii-chan*! Only I can decide whether or not you live or die!"

Shirou's smile turned sheepish. "Uh, that's good to hear...I guess..."

Illya then said, "I sensed another presence here, besides yours. Was that the enemy Master?"

Shirou felt his uneasy grin drop. He sighed. He might as well admit it to someone just how badly he had failed. "No, that wasn't an enemy. It was one of..."

The loud roar of an engine cut Shirou off. He, Illya, and Berserker looked up. Approaching them, high in the sky, was a familiar red biplane. The *Tornado* ! A blue dot leapt from it, quickly showing itself to be Sonic, who landed several meters away from those assembled. He looked around at the piles of bones. He then looked at Berserker.

"Please tell me this was just a game of fetch that got out of hand." The Hedgehog deadpanned. Berserker huffed.

"Sonic..." Shirou began, catching his friend's attention. "I really screwed up..."

After Tails landed the plane, Shirou told the off-worlders about what had happened. He imagined that both Sonic and Tails would be upset over his blunder. Not only had Shirou failed to protect the Emerald, but he had been unable to stop one of their friends from being taken away.

Strangely enough, while Sonic wasn't apparently happy about the turn of events, he did not seem overly upset. Just resigned.

"Okay, so, let me get this straight," Sonic said, scratching one of his quills. "Caster has Saber, Knux, *and* the Chaos Emerald," He smacked one his fist into his palm. "All right, let's do this!"

Tails nodded. "Yeah!"

Shirou blinked. "Do what?"

Sonic flashed Shirou that trademark smile. "Duh! We're gonna get our friends back, of course! What, you think I was gonna give up just like that?"

Shirou's mind stalled. "But... Aren't you upset at me? I mean, I couldn't keep Knuckles out of danger, and..."

Sonic waved a dismissive hand. "Psh! Relax, this isn't the first time Knuckles' got himself in hot water. And besides, it's not like him and

Saber are dead, are they? All we gotta do is beat Caster and they'll be free!"

Shirou felt his spirit lift a little bit. Sonic was right. Neither Saber or Knuckles were killed. Caster wanted their abilities to help her plans. And it was plain that getting their cooperation would not be an easy feat. That gave the team plenty of time to plan a rescue mission. But that brought to mind another problem.

"But we don't know where Caster is," Shirou pointed out, "How can we track her down?"

"I think I can do that," Tails piped up, "Before it vanished, I was able to scan the Boundary Field with the *Tornado*'s on-board computer. I'll need Rin's help, but if I compare the readings with the other Fields here in Fuyuki, we should be able to narrow down Caster's hideout."

"She's in the Ryuudou Temple."

The trio looked at Illya. The tiny Master had been idly standing by, slowly absorbing everything they had been saying. Only now she had decided to speak up. Her face was without emotion.

"The Boundary Field that was here a minute ago had the same kind of Prana as the one surrounding the mountain," Illya explained, "It's only fitting that Caster would take up residence at a place where leylines converge."

Sonic blinked. "Hold the phone. Caster can't be hanging at the Temple. That's where Assassin is."

Shirou's eyes widened in realization. "If Caster can steal Servants, why would she stop at just one? She could have easily taken Assassin..."

He was cut off by a yelp of fear from Tails. The two-tailed fox was now shaking.

"Rin and Archer are going to the Temple right now!" Tails cried in alarm.

"What?!"

"Assassin attacked us with a bunch of skeletons!" Tails explained rapidly, looking around at all of the bones. "But he ran out of power and retreated. Rin decided that it was a good time to attack his Master while their Servant was weakened. Assassin and Caster must have been working together from the start! And now she's got a Chaos Emerald!" He began to yell into his communicator. "Rin, this is Tails! Do you copy? Stay away from the Temple! Do you copy!?"

Illya looked up at Shirou. "Is a Chaos Emerald really that powerful, *Onii-chan*?"

Shirou nodded. "Yes. Just touching it was dangerous to me. I had to be careful or the energy would have overwhelmed me..." *But why did it feel so familiar...?*

Nobody noticed Rider leaping away, save Berserker. The blindfolded Servant had arrived a little later than Saber did, investigating the powerful boundary field. She had 'seen' (Sort of) how Shirou had lost his Servant to Caster, along with the Chaos Emerald. While Sakura had commanded by Shirou be protected, Rider was spared the need to interfere by Berserker's attack. Once it seemed that the Einzbern girl wasn't going to kill Shirou, Rider had chosen to leave. No point in making herself a target for the monster.

And there's no point in counting on Shirou's help with the Shadow, Rider thought bitterly, A mage who loses his Servant that easily will be no use in dealing with that aberration. And now that he's not a Master, he won't be directly threatened by the War. He can just go to the Overseer and seek his protection.

But that Rule Breaker...has possibilities...

Precious minutes ago...

Rin fiddled with the goggles Tails told her to wear before they separated. She and Archer were getting closer to the Ryuudou Temple, and by definition, closer to Assassin and his Master. Judging from what the Samurai had said during his duel with Archer, it would seem that the Master was definitely Souchirou- *sensei* 's mysterious bride. Thankfully, most of the monks had been dismissed from the Temple, so she would have less memories to manipulate when all was done. At her side was Archer, who had remained in astral form as they ran towards the Temple.

Rin, maybe we should wait for night to fall, Archer said through their telepathic link, The rules are against acting during the daytime.

Archer, we don't have the luxury to wait, Rin retorted, From what you've said, the only reason Assassin moved from the Temple gate was because his Master used Power Rings from Sonic's world. The longer we take to retaliate, the more time we give the enemy Master to regain her footing.

That said, you're still walking into the enemy's stronghold on your own. Archer pointed out, We have know idea what kind of defenses they might have waiting.

The pendent I made with Tails should give us the edge we need, Rin replied, Once we're in, try to locate the Master. If we can put it on her, we can stop her ability to use Magecraft.

Archer was about to voice his belief that Rin was being too optimistic, but before he could, he sensed a presence approaching. He motioned that Rin should put away the goggles. She did so, and slowed down her pace into a controlled, steady walk. As she did, her communicator began to beep. Hesitatingly, she slowly reached out and tried to find the 'Answer' button.

Archer was impressed. She got it right in one try.

" Rin, this is Tails! Do you copy? Stay away from the Temple! Do you copy!?" Tails' voice blurted out.

Rin flinched from the volume, but replied, "Stop yelling! What's going on? What happened with Emiya -kun ?"

" Things have turned bad, Rin. Caster's kidnapped Saber and became her Master- Her Noble Phantasm lets her steal Command Seals! And we think she did the same thing to Assassin! "

Rin's eyes widened. "What?" Caster became a Master? That sounded impossible.

But...it would make sense, wouldn't it. Like why Assassin was stuck at Ryuudou Temple under normal circumstances. If Caster had command over her own Servant, the Mana requirements would put a huge strain on her own Master. The Temple had multiple Leylines that could support Assassin as long as he remained there. Power Rings allowed them to cheat the system, but only as long as they held out. And having Saber would only make it harder to properly distribute Prana.

"Okay...thanks for the update, Tails," Rin replied slowly, her mind weighing pros and cons to their situation. "Be sure to berate Emiya -kun for losing his Servant for me. I think Archer and I can resolve this if we move fast enough. Controlling Multiple Servants takes a huge source of Prana, so..."

" That's just it! She took Knuckles and the Chaos Emerald! She's got Prana! "

Hang up, Rin, Archer alerted, *Here comes someone!*

"We'll discuss this later," Rin whispered into the watch-like device, "Just take Emiya -kun back to my mansion."

Rin shut off the communicator, and just in time. She could see a person coming up. It was none other than Kuzuki- *sensei* , a

briefcase in hand. Rin only relaxed just a tiny bit. While the teacher wasn't a direct threat as far as she knew, she and Archer were still near the enemy's base. If she let herself get distracted, she might end up being ambushed herself.

However...this *was* a good opportunity...

"Hello, Kuzuki- *sensei!* " Rin greeted, putting on her 'Honor student' mask. "What a pleasant surprise. I did not know you were out."

Kuzuki nodded at Rin. "Tohsaka -*san* . I was taking taking a walk to clear my head. Is there something you need at the Temple?"

He doesn't beat around bush, does he, Rin thought. Luckily, she already had an alibi. "I was hoping to talk with Ryuudou- *san* . It's about how to keep our grades up even with the school closed."

"Issei isn't home right now," Kuzuki explained, "However, I will be sure to tell him of your intentions. Good day."

Kuzuki walked off, but Rin wasn't going to be deterred so easily. "Also, I've been talking with my friends, Kuzuki- *sensei*. Is it true that you're getting married?"

"Yes." Kuzuki replied, not even bothering to turn around.

"What kind of woman is she?" Rin continued, following. "Your bride, I mean."

"Very nice." Was the curt response.

"What does she look like?"

"She's beautiful."

Rin felt her eye twitch. "What. Is. Her. *Name?* "

That time Kuzuki glanced back at Rin. "I'm sorry, I was not paying attention that time."

It's like talking to an assassin, Archer commented, He's answering your questions without giving away any information. When he wants to answer at all.

Rin frowned. There was a chance that Kuzuki had been hypnotized by the Master to avoid saying anything that could disclose their identity. Or, it was possible that he was doing of his own free will. But in order for that to be possible, he would have to be a Master himself. And the only way to check that was to see if he had...

"Kuzuki- *sensei* ," Rin said, flowing her Prana. She sent out a hypnotic command. " *Show me your Command Seal.* "

Kuzuki stopped. He turned around and glared at Rin. Granted, he seemed to have 'glare' as his default expression, but this time it looked like there was something behind it. The air behind began to shimmer and a form appeared, wrapping their arms around Kuzuki's shoulders.

"Hello, Master Rin," Caster purred, "Don't you think you were getting a bit too personal for a student?"

Rin tensed up. Besides her, Archer materialized into physical form.

Shirou walked down the city streets, Illya following close behind. Occasionally, she would reach out as if to take his hand, only to stop at the last moment. When they were alone at a crosswalk, waiting for the signal to change to "Walk", she spoke up.

"What are you going to do, *Onii-chan* ?" Illya asked.

Shirou looked behind, somewhat surprised. He hadn't realized that the little girl was following him.

"Sonic said you should fight Caster to regain control of Saber, but do you really think you can do it?" Illya asked. "After all, Caster isn't just some Lord from Clock Tower- If what you've said about her abilities

are true, then she's a witch from the Age of the Gods, where the True Magics were more commonplace. She's been siphoning Mana from the people of this city since the beginning of the War, and apparently now has an unlimited source of it," She sounded a bit miffed- either by the turn of events, or that Shirou hadn't told her about the Chaos Emerald sooner. "She'll be capable of Magecraft beyond anything done in the War before. Even if you kill her Master, that won't cause Caster to vanish before she can find a new one."

The signal changed, and the pair walked. Once they reached the other side of the street, Shirou stopped.

"Her Master," He said with realization, "That's it. We don't need to kill her Master."

"Huh?" Illya asked intelligently, "What do you mean?"

"No matter how powerful Caster becomes, she's still a Servant," Shirou reasoned, more to himself. "If we can find her Master, we can use her Command Seals to destroy her- either by having her Master do it for us, or taking those Seals from them."

Illya was about to point out that Caster was unlikely to let her Master go anywhere without her protection, when she spotted someone coming. From her occasional scrying on Shirou (For tactical purposes, of course), she recognized him as one of Shirou's friends, the boy named Ryuudou Issei.

"Ah, Emiya- *kun*, " Issei greeted. He glanced down at Illya. "Hm? Who is this girl?"

"H-hello, Issei," Shirou said, "This is Illya. She's...a relative of Kiritsugu."

Shirou applauded himself for such a clever fib on the spur of the moment. However, he wasn't sure why he said Kiritsugu. He also didn't notice Illya raising her eyebrow.

Issei did, and asked. "How come she doesn't look Japanese?"

Shirou briefly panicked, but realized that he had the perfect answer already. "Kiritsugu was always traveling around, remember? I think I heard him going to Europe once or twice."

Issei nodded, apparently accepting Shirou's explanation. "Speaking of Europeans, where is Saber?"

Shirou felt a pain in his heart, but managed to keep his discomfort contained. "She's off doing errands. What about you? Do you have any business?"

Issei shook his head. "No, I was actually on my way home. You see..."

As Issei talked, a revelation hit Shirou. His friend lived at the Ryuudou Temple, where both Caster and Assassin were stationed. The only other person living there was Kuzuki Souchirou. If it was Caster who was posing as Kuzuki's fiancée, then the Master would have to be...

"Issei, could you follow me for a moment?" Shirou asked, beckoning towards a nearby alleyway.

Confused, Issei did so. Once the three of them were in, Issei asked, "What is this about, Emiya- *kun* ?"

Shirou wasn't sure how to do this delicately. He couldn't just ask if Issei had Command Seals. For one, if he did, he would probably lie. And if he didn't, Shirou would risk exposing the Holy Grail War to a bystander. And he couldn't attack one of his friends. Which meant there was only one way to confirm anything.

With total seriousness, Shirou said, "Issei. Take off your clothes."

"WHAAAAT?!"

Illya groaned, palming her face. Onii-chan , *were you dropped on your head as a child?*

"Emiya, that's not something you say in a dark alley!" Issei half-shouted, his eyes darting every which way.

"Look, I know this sounds weird..." Shirou began.

"It certainly-!" Issei's eyes glazed over and his posture slumped.

"Issei?" Shirou asked, concerned.

"It's all right, *Onii-chan*, " Illya said, "It's just a little Magecraft I cast. We can check his body for Command Seals now. That's what you were going for, right?"

Shirou nodded dumbly. While he was glad that Illya caught on, the ease with which she ensourced his friend was not something he would be comfortable with. He was only glad that he and Illya had formed a truce before; If she wanted, Illya wouldn't need Berserker to kill him.

A bit stiffly, Shirou approached the prone Issei, praying to whatever God was listening that no one would intrude and make this weird moment even more awkward. As he reached to take Issei's coat off (Praying that there would be a Command Seal somewhere on the back so Shirou could avoid the pants), Shirou felt a sharp pain in his chest. Falling back, Shirou realized that Issei had tried to stab him with a pencil.

But it wasn't Issei, this time. Issei's eyes weren't pure black, with red dots in the center. Issei didn't have a smile better found on a snake about to bite. And Issei *certainly* didn't have an evil aura of Prana seeping out of his body like smoke!

Evil!Issei lunged again, wielding the the writing implement like a dagger. Thankfully, Shirou wasn't badly hurt by the first attack, and so could easily jump aside.

"Issei, stop!" Shirou cried, but not too loudly to avoid attention.

"He probably can't hear you, *Onii-chan*, " Illya commented on the sidelines. "That's Caster's Prana. I guess putting him in stasis released some built-in failsafe Caster implanted in case someone tried to get too close."

Shirou would have had words to say about Illya cavalier tone of voice, but he was too busy trying to wrestle off Issei. Apparently, besides a total loss of independence and voice, the spell had increased the young monk's physical strength. Either that, or the battle against Caster had exhausted him that much.

Gritting his teeth, Shirou managed to throw Issei off. While he would have wanted to settle this without seriously hurting his friend, he couldn't let this go on. Not only was his friend being controlled, but every second they wasted here would mean less time to mount a counterattack against Caster. As Issei got to his feet, Shirou lunged, his hand tightened into a fist. One good punch in the solar plexus sent Issei into a crouch. Not wanting to give Issei a chance to recover and retaliate, Shirou dove and put Issei into a full-nelson.

"Illya! Break the spell!" Shirou shouted, "Please!"

Illya nodded, and and pointed at Issei. With his struggle to keep Issei restrained holding his focus, Shirou didn't exactly see what the little Master did, but whatever it was, it must have worked. Issei suddenly went limp. A bit cautiously, Shirou laid his friend on the ground. After a moment, he forced one eye open. Thankfully, the eyes had gone back to normal.

It's a bit strange looking at Issei's eyes without glasses being in the way, Shirou thought, But at least he's saved. This could've gotten ugly. Looking up, Shirou was about to thank Illya for her part when he noticed that the child had gone a little pale. "Are you all right, Illya?"

"A bit," Illya said, leaning against a wall. "But despending the Magecraft of someone like Caster isn't easy, even for someone like me. A Mage from the Era of the Gods is capable of a higher level of spellcasting."

Shirou nodded, relieved that they had fixed the problem without any serious injury. *I guess now I should check to see if Issei has a Command Seal...*

"I don't think this guy is the Master." Illya piped up.

"What makes you say that?" Shirou asked, confused, but also relieved that he wasn't going to have to take Issei's clothes off.

"Because, a Servant's first duty should be insuring their Master's safety," Illya explained, "Caster had a safeguard to protect her Master's identity, but she didn't show up herself. It's more likely that Glasses- *kun* is close to her Master, but that's all."

Shirou considered Illya's words. *But the only other real person staying at the Ryuudou Temple is Kuzuki- sensei . Does that mean he's the Master?*

In the area before the Ryuudou Temple, the light fantastic was being flashed in multiple colors. Caster would attempt to blast Archer with her own Magecraft, and Archer would either deflect and cut through the rays with his Projected swords. To prevent outsiders from noticing the epic battle taking place, a Boundary Field had summoned to surround the area. With all of the excitement, no one noticed the robotic drones scouting the area.

This is bad, Archer thought as he Projected weapons to shoot against Caster, I'm starting to run low- not that I had much to begin with- and it doesn't seem like Caster's going to get tired anytime soon! Be nice if Gilgamesh were to show up and obliterate her for like he did the first time...

Meanwhile, Rin maintained her distance from the skirmish, but continued to approach Kuzuki. Normally, killing the Master was the fastest way to ensure a Servant's death. But Caster having the energy of a Chaos Emerald to prolong her existence rendered that meaningless. As such, there was only one surefire method to defeating Caster; having the Master Command Caster to die.

I'll target the non-vital areas first, Rin thought as she ran at her teacher, *That should be enough to convince him we mean business...*

As the gap between teacher and student lessened, the last thing Rin saw was Kuzuki taking off his glasses.

Then, everything changed.

The roundhouse kick Rin wanted to deliver into Kuzuki's side became blocked- no, caught. The joint between her foot and leg were pressed from above and below by Kuzuki's elbow and knee. Before a second had passed, Kuzuki pulled Rin towards him, and delivered a series of powerful blows into her body, before sending her flying with an open-palm strike. Rin crashed into a tree, sending bark flying off of the other side.

" *Rin!* " Archer cried in alarm.

"In a life and death battle, you don't even target the vitals, Tohsaka?" Kuzuki asked as he approached the fallen girl. "Isn't that a bit careless for someone normally so meticulous?"

As Rin struggled to get up, gritting her teeth in pain, she saw that Kuzuki's fists were glowing. *Runes...but, Kuzuki isn't a Mage, how...?* Then, she realized. *Caster!*

"Normally, the role of a Master is to provide support for their Servants," Kuzuki explained as he took a fighting stance, "However, there is always at least one exception to every rule."

I get it, Archer thought, looking back from Kuzuki to Caster. Caster must have used Magecraft to enhance Kuzuki- sensei's abilities. Combined with martial arts, he's become a force that can fight Servant's directly.

Rin, still leaning against the tree but now standing, fired off a series of Gems at Kuzuki. The former assassin easily dodged them as he charged at his target. Rin was already trying to get out of the way, but it was clear that she wouldn't be able to escape Kuzuki's strike. But before Kuzuki could reach, the ground between the two exploded. Kuzuki whirled around to glare at Archer, who had his bow ready. Before Archer could do anything, he had to dodge some spellfire from Caster.

I feel like I'm trying to swim in quicksand, Archer thought, I can't cover Rin and fight these two at the same time!

Caster must have cast a spell to read minds, for she said, "What are you going to do, Archer? Your Master can't support in such a state, and you can't defend her. It must be so difficult having such a unreliable Master."

"What's your point?" Archer asked, keeping his eyes on the witch, while had his senses on Kuzuki. Luckily, the ex-killer was paying more attention to Archer than Rin. The bowman Projected a new set of swords just in case.

"I'm saying, us being enemies seems so meaningless at this point," Caster went on, "It's plainly obvious that if this goes on, both you and that girl will be killed.

"So why not save yourself?"

Archer stopped. So did Rin.

Caster pulled out *Rule Breaker*. Archer's eyes absorbed every detail of its design.

"With the Chaos Emerald under my control, I have more Prana than I know what to do with," Caster explained, "Why frustrate yourself with the limited abilities your Master gives, when you could join hands with the winner of the War?"

"You think you've won, just because you found a shiny rock?" Archer asked sardonically.

Caster chuckled. "Oh, Archer, if only you knew the true point of this War."

To summon a horrific monster made of evil and destroy the world? I think I've got that part down.

"To a true Mage, there is more than one path to victory," Caster explained, "Merely killing the other Servants is just one course of action. And that will just leave one Servant to claim the wish. But, if we were to join hands..."

Caster trailed off, but her offer was clear. Whatever 'method' she had discovered, it was possibly one that could allow multiple people to achieve the Grail's power. It was hard to tell if this was just an exgerrated theory, or an outright lie. But the point was that if Archer came over to her side willingly, he could get a wish of his own. Normally, Archer would tell her to shove it, but with the odds being stacked against them so badly...

"Maybe it won't be so bad," Archer said aloud. He heard Rin gasp, but forced himself to ignore it. "After all, this may be the only way to accomplish my goals..." He let his arms down and walked towards Caster, his sword disappating.

Caster's smile broadened. She looked more and more like the cat that had just finished eating the canary. She reached out with her dagger and pointed the tip at Archer. "Then we shall now forge a new contract."

The blade wasn't even sharp enough to prick Archer's skin, but he felt a huge rush afterwards. The Prana he received from his bond with Rin was instantly replaced by something stronger, more potent. If power had a flavor, then the kind filling him was a zesty martini compared to Rin's glass of water.

And she only has one Chaos Emerald, Archer thought, God help us all if she ever found the other six...

Caster examined the Command Seals that appeared on her arm. "Ahh, very good..." She turned back and looked over Archer's shoulder. "Now, as your first job as a Servant is to tie up a loose end."

"You invite into your ranks for some knotwork?" Archer asked sarcastically, "Gosh, I'm so honored."

Caster gave him a flat look. "Let's dispense with the comedy. I want you to kill your former Master."

"What for?" Archer asked evasively. He could already sense Rin beating a hasty retreat. Thankfully, Kuzuki wasn't making chase. Apparently, he had no interest in the War beyond anything that affected him personally.

"Call it a precaution on our part," Caster said, her eyes glinting. "We can't have dear Miss Tohsaka spread news of our new partnership. The less people know, the better it will be for us," She held up her hand. "Now, are you going to do it, or should I *order* you to do it?"

Archer grimaced. He didn't like the idea of turning his bow on Rin, but he knew that if he resisted openly Caster would use a Command Seal- or worse, her own Emerald-enhanced Magecraft. As he Projected a bow, he decided to "accidentally" miss and blame it on an order from Rin not to attack him. It wouldn't be exactly a lie, as she had made it clear allies weren't to fight each other. (That lecture had been born from his insistence to just kill Shirou before he bungled it)

Before he could see his ploy through, Archer's ears pricked up at a faint noise. It was steadily and rapidly growing closer. Archer quickly realized what it was, just as something zipped by, followed by an "Eek!" With a grin, Archer let go of the bow, knowing full well that his arrow (It was just an arrow this time, not a sword) wouldn't be able to catch Sonic.

Well, that's one problem down. Now, what can I do from here...?

As he carried Rin as far from the Ryuudou Mountain as fast he can, Sonic said, "Just hold, Rin! Tell Archer to meet us at Shirou's place."

Rin didn't answer. Clinging to Sonic's arms, she just looked down at the ground.

"Uh, Rin?" Sonic asked, a bit worried. "What's wrong?"

"...Archer's not coming back." The Mage said sadly, and glanced at hand where her Command Seals *used* to be.

"I'm home!" Shirou called out. He and Illya entered the Emiya Estate and left their shoes by the door and went to the living room. Shirou felt bad about leaving Issei alone, but Illya assured him that the student council president would have no memories of what happened in the alley, or his encounter with Shirou. He would believe he had just fallen asleep on the bench where Shirou had left him.

" *Onii-chan*, who are you talking to?" Illya asked, "I thought you lived alone."

"Not all the time," Shirou replied, miffed. "My teacher likes to check up on me-" *And bum free meals.* "-and one of my classmates comes by most of the time to help out with dinner."

"Well, there's no one here now," Illya pointed out, "So, what next? I followed you all the way back to your house, but there's nothing here to get, is there? Wouldn't it have made more sense to go to Tohsaka's?"

"Just because I'm fighting in the Holy Grail War doesn't mean I can ignore my normal life," Shirou explained, "I've been lucky so far, but Fuji- Nee and Sakura are going to wonder where I disappear to if he chores aren't done. Besides...I need this."

" *Onii-chan*, are you saying that mundane chores are more important than making War preparations?" Illya asked.

Shirou nodded. "They are. This kind of normal life may not be much, but it's still something I treasure. I want to preserve it for as long as I can." *But is there really nothing to do here for the War? I feel like I came back for a reason...*

"Anyway, Tohsaka's place was attacked, remember?" Shirou continued, "So, this might be the only safe place for us in Fuyuki."

"The home of an amateur Mage, surrounded by a basic Boundary Field, in the battle for the ultimate power, safe?" Illya raised an eyebrow. " *Onii-chan* , are you even thinking about what you're saying?"

"Well, it's not like I have a castle like yours." Shirou retorted. However, that sentence gave birth to an idea.

But ideas would have to wait, as the door swung open and a new challenger to Shirou's patience arrived.

"Shirou, I'm home!" Came the very loud announcement as Fujimura Taiga came in through the door.

Shirou gulped. Taiga had been working late when Illya invited herself for dinner that night, but now there was no avoiding it. He quickly began to formulate a series of plausible explanations as to why a

high-school boy would bring an unrelated girl to his house. Given how excitable Taiga was, this would be an uphill battle.

Luckily, Taiga didn't seem to notice as she strode into the room. Her eyes brightened as she saw Shirou, then narrowed in thought. Behind her, Illya took out a bag of chips.

"Hmm?" Taiga raised an eyebrow and looked and inquisitively. "Where's Saber? I thought she'd be with you, Shirou."

Shirou felt his insides tighten. "She's.... Saber's just out on an errand. She'll be back soon."

Taiga hummed, crossing her arms in thought. "Just like Kiritsugu... That guy would always just wander off without telling anyone. And he was pretty tight-lipped on where he went. It used to drive grandfather nuts for some reason..."

"Maybe he didn't think your family needed to know what he was doing." Illya piped up. She popped a cracker in her mouth.

"But trust and communication are important to a relationship, even between neighbors," Taiga replied, "You're think that after all of the help Grandpa gave him when he and Shirou first settled here..."

Taiga trailed off. Slowly, she turned her head towards Illya. And Illya, seated at the dining table, munching on crackers, waved. Rather dumbly, Taiga waved back. She then turned to Shirou. Shirou inhaled. He could feel it coming.

"SHIROU! WHO IS THIS LITTLE GIRL AND WHAT IS SHE DOING HERE?!"

Taiga's shout shook the shutters. Birds that were resting on rooftops flew off. Small infants that were just put to sleep woke up bawling.

Critical hit. Shirou thought. If he thought Taiga had been angry when she first met Saber, he clearly hadn't seen anything yet.

Illya chose that moment to introduce herself. Nonplussed by the Tigers roar, she stood up and curtsied. "Hello to you. I am Illyasviel von Einzbern, and I have come from Germany to be with my *Onii-chan*. "

"ONII-CHAN!? Shirou, who..." Taiga trailed off. She shut her eyes and crossed her arms, clearly deep in thought. "...Did you say Germany?"

Illya nodded. "That is correct. I am the daughter of the noble Einzbern family, so I expect to be treated nicely."

But Taiga wasn't really paying attention to Illya anymore. She kept muttering, mulling over something. It was actually a little disorienting to Shirou.

This is so spooky, Shirou thought, I don't think I've ever seen Fuji - nee think so hard. I wonder what's going on in there...

"Hrmm... Hey, Shirou," Taiga said quietly, "Did you know that Kiritsugu was married once?"

"R-really?!" Shirou gaped, losing his train of thought. Although it paled to the shock of losing Saber, this revelation was a bit jarring to say the least. But he didn't understand what this had to do with Illya."

"Yeah, I overheard grandpa and Kiritsugu talk about it once," Taiga continued, giving Illya sidelong glances. "It was after one of Kiritsugu's trips..."

Taiga trailed off. Her head bent down. Her arms, once crossed, went limp. Shirou didn't like the look of it.

"Fuji- nee ?" Shirou asked, leaning in cautiously.

Illya stood up with a start. "Onii-chan, *don't go near her!* "

And then, disaster struck.

It was a dark room. No, it wasn't merely dark. It was if someone had taken shadows, gave them physical form, and used it to create walls to block out everything else. Even with Reinforced eyes, Archer could only see the other three occupants, taking refuge from the darkness in mystically summoned spotlights.

Knuckles the Echidna, bound in chains hanging from the ceiling. In fact, there were so many links surrounding his body that only his head and sneakers were visible, sticking out of the metal cocoon. His eyes were shut, trapped in an unnatural slumber.

Opposite of Knuckles was Saber. She too, was bound, but not nearly as much as the Echidna was. Only her wrists and feet were tied. Any more tethers would get in the way of the revealing white dress Caster had forced her into. And she too, was unconscious.

And Caster was dead in the center, all too full of life. She was surrounded by runes, carved into the floor and orbiting her person in the air. The witch had the Chaos Emerald floating in front of her. Sparks of purple lightning crackled around. Archer could feel the performance of high-level Magecraft. He actually had to tilt his head to avoid being struck by the lightning.

"Oh, this is much better than Issei," Caster hissed as she worked her Magecraft, "Oh yes... "

Shirou, rather pointlessly, stood protectively in front of Illya. This act was pointless for two reasons;

One, Illya was still much, much more powerful than him.

Two, the dangerous force Shirou hoped to protect his guest from... was *Taiga*.

His normal hyperactive had taken an offensive stance. She gripped the dreaded *Tora-Shinai* , killing intent rolling off her as thick as the

Magecraft that gripped her. His teacher's eyes had the same as Issei's when Caster's spell had taken control.

Taiga lunged. Even with his legs being Reinforced, Shirou just barely dodged the attack, grabbing Illya and diving outside. The *Tora-Shinai* struck the wall, creating a large crack. Taiga recovered quickly and lunged once more, bringing up the *Tora-Shinai* in preparation of her assault. Seeing this, Shirou dove out of the way, but this time did not bring Illya with him. As he guessed, Taiga ignored the young girl and focused her attack on Shirou.

Looks like Caster's only concerned with me... Shirou thought as he did his best to avoid Taiga, *That's a relief. At least Illya won't be in danger...*

Needing a weapon, but unwilling to risk hurting Taiga, Shirou instinctively Projected a copy of the *Tora-Shinai* to better defend himself. Strangely, though, he found himself wielding the weapon the way Taiga would. However, it wasn't enough. Even in her normal state of mind, Taiga was a relentless fighter. Now, what little restraint she had in combat was stripped away by Caster's manipulations. Although his own skills were increasing thanks to his sparring matches with Saber, Shirou quickly found himself overwhelmed.

As Shirou tried, in vain, to parry his controlled-teacher's strikes, he didn't pay much attention to Illya. But if he had, he would have seen the look of distress in her eyes.

"*Onii-chan*, something's wrong!" Illya shouted, "I can't even begin to break the spell!"

It's because of the Chaos Emerald, Shirou realized, *Caster didn't have it when she put that spell on Issei, but now...!*

Taiga continued to push Shirou back, knocking him towards the shed. As he crashed through the doors, Shirou dropped *faux Tora-Shinai*, causing it to dissolve. Taiga advanced on Shirou, the real *Tora-Shinai* raised in preparation. Shirou briefly considered using

something among the many piles of odds and ends. But even if he could get lucky and knock Taiga out, there would not necessarily break Caster's hold on her.

I Just wish I had a way to undo Magecraft... Shirou thought, when Archer's words reappeared in his mind;

"...You should create something that can fulfill your needs."

Something he needs... Right now, Shirou needed a way to break Caster's control over Taiga. A tool that can sever the spell that bound her...

" This is Rule Breaker , " Caster said, "It is a sword of betrayal and negation. It's power is such that it can nullify any Magecraft in the world."

An idea began to form. He could summon Archer's swords...could that be the same for other Servants? But Archer's *Kansho* and *Bakuya* had no extraordinary powers...would a fake *Ruler Breaker* have the same abilities the original did?

If Sonic were here, he'd probably say, "Let's do it! We've got nothing to lose! " Shirou thought, and began to concentrate.

Shirou didn't notice that the magic circle carved into the shed's floor was glowing again. Nor was he aware of the flickering light beneath the boards. Not even Taiga, pushed forward by her twisted puppeteer, drew his attention. Every percent of Shirou's focus was concentrated on the task at hand.

I Am The _ Of My Sword

Shirou felt the heat in his body spark up. That same sensation when he first Projected before Sonic. But this time, it was different. Before, the fire had no place to go. Shirou's false Mage Circuits twisted and distorted the power, mutating the spell. The lack of self he held at the time turned the Magecraft against him. But the instruction he

received from Rin gave Shirou the skill he needed to better process the energy. The time he had spent with Sonic granted Shirou clarity to shape the tool. Light appeared in his hand, taking the form of Caster's Noble Phantasm.

That's when Taiga attacked. The possessed teacher lunged at Shirou bringing her *shinai* down. Shirou, in what little room the shed had, darted around Taiga. As the *Tora-Shinai* crashed into the floorboards, Shirou jammed the *Rule Breaker* into Taiga's side. For a moment, it didn't seem like it worked. Then, Shirou felt the Magecraft leave Taiga. His neighbor fell to the floor, going limp and hanging halfway over the hole. Shirou let out a sigh of relief. The battle was over.

" *Onii-chan*, are you all right?" Illya called from outside, worried.

"I'm fine, Illya," Shirou replied, "And so is Fuji- *nee* . I freed her with *Ruler Breaker*... "

Then it hit him. Shirou had just *stabbed Taiga*! Panicking, he ran over to Taiga's and pulled her up. Trembling, he saw a fresh, red stain when he had 'applied' the fake Noble Phantasm.

"Illya, call an ambulance, quick!" Shirou yelled in alarm. As he pulled Taiga up, he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. Despite the very pressing need to help Taiga, Shirou's curiosity bid him to take a closer. Laying Taiga down, Shirou peered over the side of the broken wood to look down the hole.

There, among the shards of timber, was a glowing, yellow, gem- a *Chaos Emerald* .

To be continued

Tiger Dojo

Taiga: There and back again, it's the TIGER DOJO! I am Fujimura Taiga, your instructor! Ugh...it hurts...

Illya: And I am Illya, the Number One Student!

Taiga: I'm not feeling my best, so let's just move on to the Q & A...Shirou, why couldn't you have saved me less painfully...?

Illya: Our first question comes from Perry; " *Do you think the Eggman Fleet would make an appearance?* "

Taiga: The wha-? Oh, those ships that appeared in *Sonic Heroes* . Iunno...

Illya: I don't think Eggman has enough room to bring an armada that big with him to Fuyuki. He might have a few more battleships, like his *Flying Torpedo* , but that's it.

Taiga: Our next question is from an anonymous reader; " *Is the Master Emerald gonna play a part?* " Hmm... No!

Illya: Knuckles left the Master Emerald back in his homeworld. I think that water monster is guarding it, now.

Taiga: Exactly! When leaving...you must... get a... (*Faints*)

Illya: Eee! She's fainted from bloodloss! That's all for now, I've gotta get some healing Magecraft ready!

Worth a Chance

Chapter 13: *Worth a Chance*

As he clutched the book, Shinji's mouth twisted into a horrible smile. After countless hours of searching, he finally found what he needed. Not even the weight of Orbot and Cubot hanging over his shoulders could ruin the moment.

"'Homunculus'," Orbot read, and asked, "Are you suggesting that the Holy Grail is connected to one of these constructs?"

Shinji nodded, unwilling to vocalize his affirmation. He was afraid that if he opened his mouth, all that would come out would be a laugh better suited for supervillains of children's *anime*.

"Lessee..." Cubot murmured, and began to read the passage. "'.... *and with the destruction of the homunculous, this Holy War has ended before it even began. I begin to question the Einzberns' insistence on making the Grail's Container a living creature...*' Does that mean the Holy Grail is hidden in a person?"

"I....think it's more probable that the homunculous *becomes* the Grail, if what we've read earlier is accurate," Orbot considered, "We'll need to inform Dr. Eggman..." He patted Shinji on the head. "Good work, Shinji."

"Yeh, good Shinji." Cubot said, doing as Orbot.

And as slightly irritating their actions were, Shinji felt a small glow of pride. This was probably the first time anyone had seriously applauded his actions and accomplishments. Before, the most he had gotten for his forays into the family library were admonishments for wasting his time, mostly from Zouken.

But it was still annoying. "Cut that out," Shinji said testily, knocking both robots from his shoulders. They landed on the floor with

simultaneous clunks, retracting into their compact modes to reduce impact. While Orbot was able to right himself with a smooth roll, Cubot wasn't as quick. Having landed on his face, his attempts to flip his blocky form were less than graceful. As he moved, he noticed something lurking in the dark corner of the library, virtually unseen unless your eyes happened to be on the floor.

"Hey, What's that?" Cubot pointed at the large eye staring back at him.

...Five minutes later, while Orbot and Cubot pretended to be bookends, Shinji was explaining to his grandfather what exactly had put a hole in the library ceiling. The floor was littered with books, pages, and and books that very recently lost their pages.

"...And then it just ripped its way into ceiling!" Shinji finished, sounding a bit hysterical.

"But what did it *look* like?" Zouken asked, deeply agitated. Inside, he was torn. Part of him was disgusted at Shinji's wailing, especially after his actions outside. There was also a great deal of fury boiling within, rage that his home's defenses had been penetrated so deeply. It was a blow to whatever pride he held as a Mage.

"Like... I dunno, like some kind of star-shaped leech-thing, with a giant eye in the center." Shinji glanced up at the hole in the ceiling, clearly worried that the creature would come back for Round Two.

Zouken ignored Shinji's nervous twitching to focus on his own musings. If what Shinji said was remotely accurate, then the creature that escaped from the library was a familiar similar to the nightmarish creatures the Caster from the Fourth War summoned. And the only who could bring one of *those* freaks back into the world was Avenger.

I can't let this go on, Zouken thought angrily, I must regain control over the Shadow...by any means necessary.

Zouken's gnarled features twisted into a wicked smirk. An idea came to him. The only reason Avenger was acting out was due to the weak will of his Master.

Perhaps it is time I gave Sakura a remedial lesson in what it means to be a Master... the ancient Mage thought sinisterly.

"Okay, I'm gonna put the last board down," Shirou instructed, "Ready with the hammer and nails?"

Sonic nodded. "Yo!"

As Sonic hammered nails into the shed's new floor, Shirou found himself reviewing everything that had happened.

After Taiga had been sent to the hospital, Illya took her own leave.

"When you are ready to take the fight to Caster, please do not hesitate to invite me," She had said, "I will be waiting in my castle for you, *Onii-Chan!* "

It was possible that the threat Caster posed while possessing a Chaos Emerald had motivated the tiny Master into taking a more direct role in the upcoming battle. And it was good that she left when she did, Shirou did not want to share the contents of the shed's secret chamber. While retrieving the yellow Chaos Emerald, Shirou found other items as well, hidden there by Kiritsugu. There were objects used for Magecraft, and other things as well, such as papers on seismic predictions.

The most alarming were the guns. And the special bullets designed to destroy a target's ability to use Magecraft. Shirou *really* didn't want anyone else to find these weapons, and conspired to repair the floor to hide them.

That was when Sonic, Tails, and Rin showed up. They too, were alarmed to hear what had transpired, and what Shirou had found.

While Tails and Rin went over the files, Sonic helped Shirou fix the shed and brought him up to speed (Ha ha) on Archer's defection. Shirou was both angered and disappointed to hear how easily the bowman had abandoned Rin. It brought back bad memories from the Fire, of how Shirou was forced to ignore the dying people to save himself...

But everyone was elated to hear how Shirou saved Taiga. Rin was stunned to learn that Shirou could duplicate Caster's Noble Phantasm with his Projection spell. However, her emotions did a complete turnaround after she had read the files.

"Emiya, what the *Hell* was going on in your father's head?" She demanded, marching up to him.

"What are you talking about?" Shirou asked.

Rin shook one of the papers. "If I understand *this*, " She said, her voice hard. "Your step-dad was trying to disrupt the leylines of Fuyuki!"

"How's that again?" Sonic asked, done hammering. He sat next to Shirou and rested against the wall.

Tails hovered by Rin's shoulders. "The files are a bunch of calculations and seismic reports on the area," he explained, "From what we can gather, the late Mr. Emiya might have been trying to artificially instigate an earthquake with some applied explosives."

"Wait, a quake?" Sonic raised an eyebrow, his tone worried. "How big of a quake?"

Tails shrugged. "Well, I'm no seismologist, but it doesn't seem like it would have adversely affected the city structure. And not for another few decades, at least."

Shirou felt a sense of relief. For a moment, he thought that his savior was a closet terrorist. But then he saw the look in Rin's eye and

became worried.

Rin sighed. "You don't get it, do you, Emiya *-kun* ?" She asked, "There's a reason why the Holy Grail War has always taken place here in Fuyuki; The leylines in the landscape. The flow of power allows the Grail to recharge so it can summon Servants into the real world. But if your dad's crazy scheme works, that flow will be altered, and possibly destroyed forever.

"Emiya Kiritsugu was trying to *destroy* the Holy Grail War!"

And just like that, it all made sense. Ever since the beginning of his involvement in the War, Shirou had wondered why his foster father, a Mage, had not told him of the annual contest that shook the city. If Kiritsugu had invoked a plan to end the Grail Wars, and if it seemed probable that the plan would succeed, such warnings would be unnecessary. And judging from Rin's reaction, if word got around that Kiritsugu was working on such a project, other Mages would have taken...unpleasant action.

"Sounds like a good idea to me," Sonic noted, rocking slightly. "I don't think this city can handle another Magic Ghost War."

Rin groaned, palming her face. She was sorely tempted to lecture all of them about the importance attaining the Holy Grail held for Mages. But she knew that when it came to proper Mage ideology, she was the odd man out.

"Look, we can't mention this when we go to Illya's tomorrow," She said at last, "The Einzberns have been seeking the Holy Grail even before there's been a War. There's no telling how they'll react if they find these files."

"I'll put them someplace safe, Rin," Shirou offered, "Leave it to me."

Rin sighed, and handed the papers over. Shirou decided that the best place for these files was a special compartment in his bedroom, which held other... *reading material*.

"What about the guns?" Sonic asked, glancing at the repaired shed-floor. "You okay just leaving 'em in there?"

Shirou nodded. "Yeah, it's not like I can take them with me for now. And if I turn them into the police, I wouldn't be able to explain where I got them. Do you not like guns, Sonic?"

Sonic shrugged dismissively. "Eh, never been a fan," he smirked. "Bullets aren't fast enough."

Shirou rolled his eyes good-naturedly. Sonic's casual arrogance was, in a way, uplifting.

Sonic then frowned. "Seriously, though, guns are dangerous. Unless you've been secretly practicing to be a quick-draw expert, I wouldn't mess around with them."

"Besides, it's not like guns are going to be much help against the kind of people we're fighting," Rin pointed out, "Emiya, you're too much of a softy to consider using lethal force of Masters, and both Servants and Eggman's robots will be immune to normal bullets."

Eggman's robots, perhaps. But Shirou hadn't told Rin about the Origin Bullets. And he was curious to wonder what would happen if a bullet designed to destroy Magecraft struck a being whose existence was entirely due to Magecraft.

Sonic stood up and stretched his arms. "Let's call it a night. Between fighting evil priests and conspiracies, I've hit my limit. We can go to Illya's tomorrow morning."

"Sounds like a plan." Tails agreed while Shirou and Rin exchanged looks. Sonic had told them his suspicions that Kotomine had more influence over Lancer's actions. While Rin had her doubts, Shirou decided that after they saved Saber (And the rest) from Caster, they should better investigate the priest's activities.

Provided Dr. Eggman didn't launch another attack in the meantime...

"What the heck *are* these things?" Dr. Eggman demanded to no one in particular. Before him lay the contents of the latest Egg Pod shipment. Thankfully, Eggman was on the other side of a thick forcefield, and thus protected from the squishy maws of evil mutant starfish.

"Computer!" Dr. Eggman ordered, pointing at the starfish. "Do a full scan of these creatures and provide me with the data, post-haste!"

The next few minutes were filled with beeping as a blue light shined over the containment room. Finally, a bell rang, and a nearby monitor lit up. Eggman turned to examine the data readout.

"Hmmm, mostly comprised of negatively charged energy...sounds a bit too much like Dark Gaia for my tastes," Eggman murmured thoughtfully, stroking his mustache. "But, unless someone forgot to report the planet shattering on the news, I'm sure it's just an unnerving coincidence."

" *Sir, who are you talking to?* "

Eggman whirled around. On another terminal was an image of Orbot. In the background was Cubot and Shinji. The three of them were apparently in some dusty old library. Shinji was painting Cubot for some reason.

"Never mind that," Eggman grumbled, "Do you have anything to report?"

" *Well, according to Shinji, the power of the Holy Grail requires a living being to manifest,* " Orbot explained, " *It's apparently an artificial human created by another family of wizards. Judging from the description in the book, there may be a chance that the Master of Berserker may be this conduit.* "

Eggman stroked his mustache again. "Not a bad way to rig the game. But if this Master is killed, the Grail will be lost, won't it?"

" Yes, that was mentioned quite a bit, " Orbot commented, " According to one book, in its 500-year history, not once has anyone achieved a wish from the Grail. I think a more durable form of container may be required. "

"Durable, eh?" Eggman crossed his arms and drummed his fingers in thought, "I think I can manage that. You three work on finding that little... Grail-Girl Master. Radio me once you have her location and I'll send a sub-boss to retrieve her. Eggman out!"

" But- "

Eggman cut off the communicator. The screen was replaced with a radar map. It showed the high school. There was a large circle helpfully labeled "ENERGY SURGE LOCATION". A dot, labeled "E-3872", was on route towards the source.

"-We already know where she lives." Orbot finished as the connection went dead. He sighed.

"Well? What did he say?" Shinji asked, applying one last brushstroke to Cubot.

"He's very pleased with our efforts, and gave us the rest of the day off," Orbot lied, "What are doing to Cubot?"

"Life is pain..." Cubot moaned, having embrace his new gothic paint job.

"Oh, shut up, this stuff washes right off," Shinji berated, then to Orbot said, "Tonight's the night Grandpa trains Sakura in Magecraft. They always do it in one of the estate's underground chambers and lock the doors, so I'm going to have Cubot..."

"Wait, I thought your family couldn't do magic." Cubot interrupted.

"She's *adopted* ," Shinji growled, "Anyway, I want you to go down there and watch what happens. I'll need to know how to practice Magecraft when I get it myself. As long as you don't move or make a sound, no one will notice you."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Cubot asked, "What if I see things my electronic eyes won't comprehend?"

"Wouldn't be the first time..." Orbot remarked as he put some books back on a shelf.

Shinji forced his eye not to twitch. "Just tell me what happened, all right? Let *me* worry about comprehension."

Cubot shrugged. "Well, when you put it like that, okay. What's the harm?"

Shinji grinned malevolently, and this time did not stop his eye from twitching.

"Okay, what the heck happened *here*? " Amy asked, looking over at all of the bones.

Amy Rose and Bazett McRemitz had just arrived at Homurahara Academy to investigate the huge spike of Prana Bazett had sensed. But when they arrived at the school, the fighting was over. As usual.

Bazett held up a bone and inspected it. From what she could gather, the bones had been animated as an offensive familiar- Dragon Tooth Warriors -but from what she could gather, they hadn't been infused with the surge of power. Apparently, they had been conjured before the Mage had received their upgrade.

"There was definitely a battle between Servants." Bazett commented, throwing the bone down.

"Who do you think won?" Amy asked.

"It's impossible to say," Bazett remarked, "When a Servant dies, their body dissolves into nothing. If their Master managed to escape, they could seek protection from the Overseer..."

"But that guy's evil, right?" Amy finished, "I still think we should see if we can take another crack at him."

Bazett secretly agreed. However, the blond man who interfered the first attempt was still there. From what Bazett could gather from her familiars, he had either lived with Kotomine in the church, or was such a good friend that he visited everyday. Either way, Bazett didn't like their chances without a Servant. But the only way to get her Servant back was to kill Kotomine!

Amy's ears then twitched. "I think I hear a car. Quick, hide!"

The two girls ran into the abandoned school building. They were just inside when an unmarked van drove up. The doors opened up and out came figures wearing what looked like fission suits, carrying odd equipment.

"Who are those guys?" Amy asked at a whisper, "They don't look like robots. Are they aliens?"

"No, I think they're human." Bazett replied, praying she was right. This situation was confusing enough. The last thing she wanted to accept was an alien invasion on top of rampaging demons, killer robots and corrupt priests.

Meanwhile, the uniformed newcomers mulled about, occasionally picking up bones for inspection. Those that weren't were waving their instruments around at everything within range.

"Weird...according to these new instruments R&D made from the robots, there was a huge energy emission. These...bones all have traces of it. But our Geiger counters can't pick up anything at all." One agent said, "Whatever this energy is, it's not radioactive."

"Just load the bones into the truck," Another agent said, "The guys at the lab can do a full examination. Our job is to search the area."

As bones were packed up and sealed in containers by some agents, other agents continued to scan the area. One scanner began to beep with more volume than before. Everyone looked at the agent carrying it.

"I'm getting a new signal," They reported, and pointed. "According to this, it's coming from over there."

Even with Reinforced ears, Bazett had trouble hearing what the agents were saying. However, with Reinforced eyes, she could see that one of them were pointing towards her and Amy's hiding spot. She swallowed and prepared her Magecraft. She was about to warn Amy, but saw that the pink Hedgehog had already taken out her Hammer.

"Look! Up in the sky!" Amy hissed pointing.

Bazett turned her gaze towards the heavens. She saw the huge object falling just before it hit. The robot landed on the ground, causing a shockwave that nearly knocked the van over, but definitely knocked everyone else off of their feet.

It looked like the freakish hybrid of a totem pool and an artillery stand. It was divided in three sections, with a pair of giant cannons on top and bottom. The cannons swiveled about, clearly looking for a target.

E-3872: *Dynamight*

Both ends of the top barrels stopped moving once they were fixed on the government van.

"Maybe it's friendly?" One of the agents asked hopelessly.

A second later, the van exploded as two mortar shells fired from the top-cannons impacted into it. Agents and soldiers dove for cover as shards of burnt metal and bones flew over their heads.

" *Never mind it's not friendly!* " That same agent shrieked as he kissed the dirt.

"Let's go, Bazett!" Amy yelled, charging out from her hiding place.

"Amy, wait!"

But it was too late for Bazett. Hammer in hand, Amy threw herself at the battle. Dynamight fired another pair of mortars at the government crew. Just when it seemed like one might obliterate a man, Amy rushed up and delivered a swat that would make Wimbledon proud, smacking the mortar away. The wayward shell collided with its sibling, creating a loud explosion that lit up the sky.

"Hey! You guys okay?" Amy asked.

"Oh my God..." The agent breathed, "A female version of Sonic the Hedgehog! Are you his little sister?"

Amy gave the man an annoyed look. "Sister? Heck, no!" She slung her hammer over her shoulders and winked. "I'm his girlfriend!"

Bazett groaned, palming her forehead. She really wished Amy would settle down for once. While it would have been tragic on some level if the agents had been killed, it would have been worse overall if any of them took those scraps leftover from the War battle. Bazett had a suspicious feeling that the gap between Magecraft and mundane technology was closing with every wave of robots Dr. Eggman sent into the city.

I'd better get to work hypnotizing those people, the Enforcer thought as she began to move, This would be a huge pain if one of them reported back...

Meanwhile, the battle of Amy Rose vs Dynamight was in full swing. The pink hedgehog was no stranger to hit-and-run tactics, and right now that was the proper course of action. Dynamight would fly in the air for periods of time, firing mortars from its barrels in order to blast Amy into oblivion. Amy would naturally dodge the shells, and once when it seemed like a good time to, try and knock a mortar back at the robot. Sometimes the redirected mortars would collide with other mortars (BOOM!), but occasionally one lucky shell would hit Dynamight. Amy did her best to aim whatever mortars she could hit back at the robot, but it wasn't easy while Dynamight was in motion. Luckily, Dynamight would land to cool its jets now and then. Whenever it did, Amy would throw herself at the robot and begin whaling on it with her hammer. She typically targeted the midsection, but would occasionally hit the lower cannons if she got the chance.

"Take that! And that! And *that!* " Amy would yell with each hit.

Glad she's enjoying herself. Bazett thought as she performed hypnosis. While casting the spell had been child's play (She made the government workers think that there was nothing at the high school, and they had to flee when the robot showed up), actually making sure they couldn't leave before she could do so was a different matter. The agents were scattered all over, and Bazett had to run with Reinforced legs in order to catch them all. This wouldn't have been so bad, except the government crew was completely scattered all over the place. And after one saw her cast her spell, the others would keep themselves away from Bazett as well they could. While her Magecraft helped close the gaps in easy time, it grated on Bazett's nerves how difficult her job had become.

Clock Tower should come up with a Boundary Field that keeps people in , Bazett thought bitterly as she sent another agent off. *Would certainly make things easier now.*

"Bazett! Look out!" Amy's yell pulled Bazett out of her thoughts- and just in time. A wayward mortar was flying in her direction!

Bazett dove out of way, an the force of the explosion as the shell erupted on the ground carried her further. The experience was more than a little harrowing. Like most (All) Mages, Bazett had a dim view of modern weapon. This experience had changed that opinion within a second. Now Bazett wanted to buy a bullet-proof vest.

After rolling to a stop, Bazett turned to see how Amy's personal fight against Dynamight was going. The robot's midsection had apparently been destroyed, but now, both the bottom and top halves were flying! They fired mortar shells at random, pocketing the school grounds with medium-sized craters.

"Doesn't this thing run out of ammo!?" Amy shouted as she dodged and darted around mortars and explosions.

Bazett charged at the robot. Leaping into the air, she delivered a Reinforced roundhouse kick and struck the metal hull as hard as she could. She landed back on the grass and winced, shaking the attacking leg. Unlike the various Badniks they had caught wandering around the city, this robot's body was made of a stronger alloy. Thankfully, her runes allowed herself a large measure of protection.

Bazett didn't have much time to rest, as one of Dynamight's halves swooped down and crush her with one of its cannons. She dodged it by means of a tumble, righting herself immediately. Once Bazett was up, she bore witness to a feat that would have been impossible for a non-Mage to pull off. Namely, the pink Hedgehog charged directly at an incoming mortar, but instead of swatting it away, she swung her hammer down, catapulting her up towards the Dynamight half. As she flew through the air, Amy swung her hammer around and struck Dynamight as hard as she could. Her blow connected with one of the cannons, knocking it in half. This apparently disrupted the airborne 'bot's balance, causing it to wobble about wildly.

As she landed on the ground, Amy yelled, "I think we've got this one on the ropes! Help me finish it off, then we can work on the other part!"

Bazett nodded, and abandoned her battle to assist Amy. Out of the corner of her eye she may have spotted something purple, but instantly filtered it out. They had more pressing matters to attend to.

Pumping as much of her Prana as her Runes could handle, Bazett charged at the wobbling Dynamight half. The robot fired a mortar at the two girls in retaliation, but the shot missed due to the aim being off balance. This wayward shell collided with another blast fired by the other Dynamight half, causing a fantastic explosion that sent shrapnel flying everywhere. As Amy deflected shards with her hammer, Bazett continued her assault on the off-balance machine. Leaping up, she delivered a powerful ax-kick on the top that briefly caused Dynamight half-B (As later dubbed by Amy) to buckle a bit. Before Bazett could deliver another blow, Dynamight-B shook her off, while Dynamight-A swooped at the two girls. One of the A-half's cannons struck Bazett, but the Irishwoman shook it off as she landed. Amy, meanwhile, continued to assault Dynamight-B, swinging her hammer as she charged. Leaping up, she slammed the hammer up onto the underside of B-half.

That did it. The machine began to spark and vibrate, before exploding wildly.

"One down!" Amy cheered, pointing a finger towards the sky. "And one to..."

"Get down!" Bazett dove at Amy and pushed her to the ground. Several mortars flew over their heads, exploding in the ground not too far away. The remaining Dynamight section was now flying around faster than before, firing its cannons repeatedly.

"It's going berserk!" Bazett yelled over the explosions.

It seemed like Dynamight wouldn't stop firing until it ran out of ammunition, or until the school became a mess of craters.

Before either could happen, a flash of purple streaked through the air. It collided with Dynamight, sending it spinning. The bright blur did

a U-turn and struck at Dynamight again, and an ethreal figure suddenly appeared in the air. Tumbling gracefully downward, the being thrust a line of some kind into the barely-functioning machine. And then, while still in mid-air, they pulled the line down, sending Dynamight's remaining component crashing into the ground. As the robot let out an explosive death throes, the figure landed before it, becoming a silhouette amid the flashing light.

Amy and Bazett kept tense as the shapely figure strode towards them, never giving smoldering heap behind her a second glance. Not that she could have seen anything with that blindfold on. Her long, purple blew in the wind like a flag.

"Uh oh," Amy muttered, "She's looks kinda like that sex fiend they mentioned on the news- Y'know, the one assaulted the girls here?"

"She's a Servant," Bazett explained quietly, "She was probably feeding off of their Mana those times."

So why was she approaching them? Bazett wasn't a Master anymore. At the moment. Did this Servant's Master connect her to Lancer, and had not realized that connection had been stolen? Or was the Servant simply hungry for Mana?

"I am the Servant Rider," The woman introduced, "And I would like your help."

"Did your Master send you?" Bazett asked cautiously. She took a step, subtly putting herself between the Servant and Amy.

Rider shook her head. "No, I am acting of my own will."

"Look, thanks for helping us with the robot, but why should we help you?" Amy demanded, "You were hurting just as many people as the Badniks do."

Rider looked intently at Amy. As intently as eyes shielded by a cloth are able. "For all the Mana that I drained, I never killed anyone. But

Unless something is done, the entire city may be destroyed...and Magecraft revealed."

"What are you talking about?" Bazett asked.

"There's this.... *creature* ..." Rider paused, as if searching for a better word. "It appeared the day before Dr. Eggman attacked the school here. It is feeding off of my Master. If something is not done, my Master will die."

"And how does that threaten the city?" Bazett asked, suspicious.

"With the Prana it's absorbing, I think it is creating the creatures that have been sighted recently," Rider explained, "If this continues, they'll overrun the city."

"Creatures...? Hey, do they- Umph!" Amy couldn't say more with Bazett covering her mouth.

"Why come see us?" Bazett asked. While she too had seen the connection between this *thing* of Rider's and Avenger's powers, she didn't want to give everything away just yet. "Why not form an alliance with one of the other Servants?"

"I...cannot trust the other fighters in the War," Rider said, "They may take actions that threaten the interests of my Master."

Amy pushed Bazett's hand from her mouth. "So what makes you so sure you can trust *us*? " The pink Hedgehog asked, "What if we decide we don't want to help your boss?" To Bazett she whispered, "The Master let Grape-head here attack people! What if she's a bad guy too?"

Rider, with her honed senses, heard Amy's hushed concerns. But she wasn't bothered. She had a trump card. Smiling, she said, "You'll help me, because I have something you want."

"I know where Sonic the Hedgehog is."

Sonic moved like lightning, complete with the slight rumble as he breached the barrier of sound. And yet, he had just enough control over himself to expertly catch Rin when she had fainted.

Earlier, Rin decided that she *reeaaaally* wanted to examine the Chaos Emerald Shirou found. The warning Shirou gave her about the potency of its power only heightened her curiosity, and his trepidation simply motivated her further. After numerous bruising to her ego (Rin and 99.99999% of Clock Tower would have called it a Mage's Pride), Rin leapt at the chance to prove herself superior to Shirou at *something* . Especially if that thing was Magecraft.

However, Rin's superior control of Prana nearly proved to be her downfall. Her senses were so honed that the minute she touched the jewel's surface, the energy spike nearly caused a cardiac arrest. Thankfully, this shock also caused Rin to drop the Emerald, sparing her from a total overload.

"Rin-!" By the time Shirou was even a step forward, Sonic was already lying his classmate on the floor.

"She's okay, now," Sonic assured, "But I think I know what caused your, uh, *accident* on my first night here."

Shirou nodded, a bit shaken. He had figured that out himself when he found the gem. Being in such close proximity, and underneath the magic circle he used to train himself, must have set up a connection that caused the power to flow and overwhelm him.

Rin stirred, then groaned, as she sat up. "That was...something else."

"How do you feel, Rin?" Tails asked, concerned.

Rin sighed. "I...I can't explain it. But now I know why Caster was so confident. With one of these in her hands...no wonder she thinks she can get the Grail without winning the War."

Shirou was about to ask what Rin meant by that, when he heard the door open. He realized that it was almost time for dinner. Which meant that the person coming in was...

" *Senpai*? Are you here?" Sakura's soft voice called out. There was a slight tremble to it.

Shirou heard a rush of air that told him Sonic had gone into hiding. And it looked like he had taken Tails with him. Good, one... *two* less things to worry about. Then Shirou realized that he still needed to account for Rin. But before he could think of something, in came Sakura, several bags of groceries in her hands. She looked *slightly* more healthy than she was the last time Shirou saw his underclassman. At the very least, she was no longer swaying when she walked. The bags under her eyes were still there.

"The...there was a sale at the market, so I thought we'd have..." Sakura trailed off when she saw Rin sitting on the floor.

Rin glanced at Sakura through half-closed lids. For someone who had only moments ago nearly suffered a cardiac arrest, she was doing a remarkable good job of appearing nonchalant and vaguely disinterested. Shirou swallowed.

"Hello, Matou- *san* ," Rin greeted, "I didn't know you would be here."

"Um, Tohsaka- *san* ..." Sakura stuttered, "Wha...what are you doing here?"

Rin shrugged, and stood up. As she stretched a bit, she said, "I heard Fujimura -*sensei* had an accident and came to offer Emiya-*kun* some company."

"What happened to *sensei*... ?" Sakura asked, looking at Shirou.

"She fell on a knife." Shirou said a little too quickly. He instantly regretted it. While it was an okay story to give the paramedics with

Illya's hypnosis to help, it was a longshot that Sakura would believe it.

"I...see," Sakura said, then straightened up. "W-well! I'll be sure to go visit her tomorrow! Now I need to get started on dinner..."

"There's no need for that," Rin said firmly, "I'll be making dinner tonight. You can just go home."

Shirou was stunned at Rin's calousness. And for a moment, Sakura appeared to be too. But, she soon hardened herself. The first-year student marched directly passed Rin and entered the kitchen.

"Please set the table, *senpai* ," Sakura called back, "And make sure to add a place for Tohsaka- *san* ."

"Okay, but don't strain yourself!" Shirou replied. He then gave Rin his best Look. "Why did you say that? It's bad enough pretending that you were going to cook, but what's the deal with trying to kick Sakura out?"

"I was trying to protect her, Emiya," Rin replied, nonplussed. In fact, she seemed to have gone completely stoic. "From what you've told me, Caster's been targeting people close to us- first Issei, and then *sensei* , right? Did you really think a witch with that much power wouldn't consider taking a hostage to get what she wants?" When Shirou didn't answer, she smirked. "Or what? Were you thinking you could fight the War and protect them at the same time? If you say that, I'll laugh." At Shirou's silence, she sighed. "Look, you can't have it both ways. When you're involved in something as fierce as a Grail War, sometimes the best you can do to keep your family safe is to distance yourself. That's what father did to us when..." She trailed off. For a moment, it looked like Rin would cry at thinking about her family.

That's right... Shirou realized in his head, *Tohsaka lost her family during the Fourth Grail War.*

Composing herself, Rin continued, "Look, if we're going to Illya's for an alliance, then we won't be able to go back and forth whenever we like. Tell Sakura that you'll be out of town...make something up...I'll suppose we'll need to explain why Saber's gone, too..."

Meanwhile, Sonic and Tails watched Sakura set up the kitchen. They spied on her from the outside window.

"Who's that girl?" Tails asked in a whisper.

"Her name's Sakura," Sonic explained, also in a whisper. "I think she's got a crush on Shirou. But the guy's either oblivious or in denial."

"Sakura...?" Tails murmured thoughtfully. A far off look appeared in his eye. "Sakura..."

"What's up?"

Tails frowned for a moment. "Do you think... Well... does she dye her hair?"

Sonic raised an eyebrow. "When have you been interested in hair colors?"

"It's...I tell you later." Tails said evasively. *The girl in that photo album had black hair...*

Sakura knew about Sonic and Tails watching her. She had also noticed that Shirou no longer had his Command Seals. It was plainly obvious that he had lost Saber. So why was Rin so insistent on being with him?

It's so cruel of Rin, so greedy, Avenger whispered- or were those her own thoughts? She couldn't tell anymore. First she got to keep mom and dad, now she's gunning for Shirou...doesn't she realize you had dibs...?

Sakura tried to focus on her cooking. But she couldn't. Now, thanks to her renewed connection to Rider, the dreams had become more convoluted. Sometimes they would be of a far off island, being stalked by warriors...until they transformed into the visions of death and destruction that she was slowly becoming used to.

And Zouken wants me for... training ... Sakura shuddered. Why did she put up with it all...? Why wasn't she fighting back...?

The image of the dying man on the stairs began to fade...

The Next Day

Ever since Shirou told him that Eggman's machine could find Magecraft, Shinji felt the best course of action was to distance himself from large sources of Prana. To that end, he had removed himself from the Matou Manor and took up residence in a hotel somewhere in town. Not a *luxury* hotel, even the Matou Clan 's vaguely-defined financial reserves would survive an extended stay in someplace opulent. But even after forming his partnership with Eggman, Shinji had elected to continue his stay at the Yampson Inn. There could be more Starfish-monsters at the manor, and besides, it smelled better.

Shinji was finishing up breakfast when he heard a knocking on the door. Gesturing for Orbot to hide, Shinji went to the door. When he opened it, he saw Cubot hovering before him on the floor.

"Hey, Shinji." Cubot greeted.

Shinji blanched. "What are you doing?! Get in here before someone sees you!"

Shinji pulled Cubot inside and slammed the door quickly. Once they were inside, he locked the door, hooked up the chain, and went over to the windows to close the blinds. As Shinji went about these tasks, Orbot left his hiding place in the wastebasket to talk with Cubot.

"So, how did it go?" Orbot asked.

"How'd what go?" Cubot blinked.

Orbot adjusted his eyes so it looked like he was raising an eyebrow. "Your mission."

"What mission?" Cubot tilted his head, "Hey, how come you guys left me in that basement?"

Orbot scratched his head. "Oh, dear."

It was at this time that Shinji came over, rubbing his hands in greedy anticipation. "Okay, tell me, what happened?" He asked, "What did Grandpa and Sakura do together?"

"Er, I think we have a problem in that regard," Orbot answered while Cubot looked confused, "Cubot seems to have no memory of what transpired in the time you hid him in your family's dungeons."

Shinji felt his eyes twitch. "He forgot?" He shot Cubot a glare. "How could you forget?! Aren't robots supposed to have brains like computers?"

"Technically, our brains *are* computers..." Orbot murmured.

"Oh, yeah, that reminds me," Cubot hovered over to Shinji and put something in his hand. "Here ya go."

Shinji looked at his gift. It was a jump drive.

"What is that, Cubot?" Orbot asked, intrigued.

"Dunno," Cubot said, "It was in my hand when I rebooted this morning, along with this note," He unfolded a piece of paper and began to read aloud. "'Dear Cubot, give to Shinji. Do **NOT** watch. Love, Cubot' Isn't that sweet of me?"

Orbot hummed, and examined the note. "I think I understand- partly- what's going on," He said, "Cubot must have erased his memory. And that data stick must contain a backup."

Shinji's expression brightened. *I get it! Clever! He made himself forget so the family secrets wouldn't be known to outsiders! This little idiot is more considerate than I thought.* He turned on his laptop and eagerly waited for it to boot up.

Orbot's eyes, however, narrowed their lights. *Hmmm, this doesn't bode well. What did Cubot see that he wanted to delete from his databanks?*

Shinji inserted the drive into a port on his laptop. As a video began to load, Orbot and Cubot floated up on either side. Shinji glanced at them in annoyance.

"Don't mind us," Cubot said, "Just pretend we're not here."

"It's starting." Orbot pointed at the screen before Shinji could chew either them out.

Shinji clicked to widen the video window so it filled the screen. And the three of them watched.

And watched.

And watched.

Once the video was over, Shinji closed the laptop. His face was completely blank, and had turned a mix of white and green.

"Oh *my* ," Orbot said, "That did *not* look comfortable."

Cubot slapped his hands over his eyes. " *Aah!* Why did I watch that!? I wanted to look away, but I couldn't!"

Shinji began to shake.

"Well, at least we can erase our memories of this," Orbot commented, pushing a button on his head. "That's a small comfort."

"Yeah, but I feel sorry for that girl," Cubot said as pushed his own button, "She probably has to do that once a week. Brr!"

Shinji couldn't take it anymore. He ran into the bathroom and began to vomit uncontrollably into the toilet. Their very recent memories deleted, Orbot and Cubot watched him go in confusion.

"What's got into *him*? " Cubot asked.

Sonic raced across the countryside, following his GPS to the coordinates that Tails programmed into him. He darted through the trees, pausing only to destroy the occasional odd Badnik he spotted here and there. Within a few minutes, he would be at his destination; Einzbern Castle, Japan Branch.

They had set out early in the morning. While the rest of the team had gone back to the Tohsaka Mansion to better secure the Ring Synthesizer and collect freshly-forged Power Rings, Sonic went ahead to scope the layout. Mostly to see if the castle's courtyard was wide enough to act as the *Tornado* 's landing strip, as Tails and the no-longer-Masters would be flying to cut their travel time down.

A beep told Sonic that he was approaching the Boundary Field that surrounded the castle grounds. As he passed through it, he felt a strange buzz all across his body...like someone wrapped him in a blanket that held a static charge. While it wasn't painful, it was an odd sensation.

That's it? S'funny, you'd think a girl who brags so much would put something a little more in her forcefields, Sonic thought as he ran down the forest path. He turned on his communicator. "Tails! Be careful when you enter the Castle's airspace! It gave me a bit of a shock, but I'm not sure what it'll do to the Tornado's instruments!"

" *Roger that!* " Tails replied.

Sonic soon arrived at the entrance of the castle. It wasn't the biggest castle he had ever seen (And he had seen quite a lot of castles in his career), but it looked nice enough. However, there was a certain stillness that bother Sonic. It was almost as if the castle was just a hole, waiting for some foolish soul to drop into...

Maybe I got here before anyone woke up. Sonic thought. From that thought came the temptation to sneak in and pop a balloon.

Before Sonic could make good on this bad idea, the doors swept open. A pair of ladies stepped out. They were eerily similar in faces, and were dressed like a pair of nuns. Their white dresses had hole right around the chest area, showing a cloths of different colors. One had a blue cloth, and the other had a black cloth. Both outfits looked like they had been put on in a hurry. The cap on the black-lady was slight askew.

Sonic smirked, and rubbed his finger under his nose. "Can Illya come out to play?"

To be continued

Tiger Dojo

Illya: Welcome to the Tiger Dojo! Our sensei is still in the hospital, so I, the Number 1 Student Illya, am in charge!

Big: I'm a cat. M'name's Big.

Illya: You again? Couldn't I get someone else as a co-host? Like that black hedgehog, he's *awesome*...

Big: Shadow doesn't do talk shows. He posted that on his Twitter page.

Illya: Rats! Well, let's get this over with. Our first question comes from multiple readers! They want to know if Metal Sonic will appear.

Well, We at the Tiger Dojo can't say for certain, buuuut...

Big: Yup.

Illya: Biiiig! You're not supposed to be so candid! Great, now you've spoiled a huge plot point!

Big: Sorry. You wanna answer the next one? Poe asks, "What do Gaia and Alaya think of Sonic and his friends?" Who're those two?

Illya: Gaia is the force and will of the Earth, whereas Alaya is the collective consciousness of humanity. Both forces are beyond mortal comprehension, so it would be hard to gauge their reactions to the appearance of the Sonic characters. I imagine that Gaia is more concerned with the effect the Chaos Emeralds are having on the leylines, and Alaya would be confused by Eggman's technology. Our next question comes from Perry: "The fact that Archer is no longer Rin's Servant, there is still a chance for him to try and kill Shirou like he did in Unlimited Blade Works right?"

Big: I dunno, Archer seems too nice for that.

Illya: That's right. Archer entered the Holy War for the chance to kill Shirou, but since he comes from an alternate timeline, he can no longer be sure that doing so would change his own fate. He might make a show of it, but there's no way to tell if he'll follow through.

Froggy: (*Ribbits*)

Big: Oh! You're right, Froggy!

Illya: What did he say?

Big: Visiting hours at the hospital are almost up. We gotta hurry or we won't be able to give Taiga this card.

Illya: Fine, fine. We'll close out the lesson with this one message from the author. "Please stop requesting stories through the review function. If you wish to ask for a certain story written, please send

them via a private message. Also, I am not accepting requests as of now." Okay, we'll see you later!

Big: Buh-bye!

The Forest of Einzbern

Chapter 14: *The Forest of Einzbern*

The red bi-plane *The Tornado* soared over the highways and forests.

"We're almost to the Einzbern Castle Boundary Field!" Tails reported, "Brace yourself for the shock!"

Rin nodded. "Understood. Are you all right, Emiya?"

Shirou nodded, shaking a little. "Y-yeah..."

Shirou had never been on an airplane before. Not even a commercial airline. So the takeoff should have been an incredible thrill. But he couldn't concentrate on that. Due to its size, there was only one extra seat behind the cockpit. This meant that Rin was forced to sit on Shirou's lap. As such, Shirou spent the entire flight with reddened cheeks. Rin had seemed a bit mortified herself at the beginning, but had quickly adjusted, and without a joke even. Shirou secretly envied her professionalism.

I just hope Tails doesn't mention this to Sonic, Shirou thought, *This is embarrassing enough as it is!*

Shirou forced himself not to focus on the embarrassment he felt from their position as he sensed the Einzbern Castle Boundary Field coming up. He braced himself for the shock Sonic had forewarned them about, and sure enough, felt a slight tingle all over his body...

" EEEYAAAAARGH! "

...Which was clearly nothing compared to the stimulation Rin felt upon crossing the field. Clearly, Illya had designed the Boundary Field to apply different levels of electrocution depending on whoever made contact with it.

"Whoa, Rin, are you okay?" Tails asked, alarmed. His fur was standing out on all ends. "Should we land?"

But Rin wasn't paying attention to the Fox. "You little brat... I know you're laughing...!"

"I think she's fine, Tails," Shirou said, "Let's continue on to the castle."

"Roger," Tails nodded, "We should be there in a few minutes now... Hey, what's that?"

Shirou and Rin (The latter of whom was still wincing) looked down. Apparently, someone had planted a bunch of bright flowers in a formation that, when looked from above, resembled a giant arrow.

"I guess she's been expecting us," Shirou guessed, "But how did Illya know we'd be coming in by plane?"

"We flew over the castle a few days ago," Tails replied, "Maybe she saw us then?"

"Urg...just get us there," Rin ordered, still cringing in pain. Her pigtails were as stiff as spikes. "Emiya, you and I need to keep an eye out, in case that tiny sadist changed her mind and tries something."

"You think the Einzberns put Surface to Air Missile launchers around their castle?" Shirou asked. After finding Kiritsugu's guns, he was developing a margin of paranoia.

"I think Berserker can knock an airliner out of the sky if he throws his ax hard enough." Rin replied with total seriousness.

The *Tornado* flew on for a little bit more until the castle came into sight. Tails steered the bi-plane around the castle, looking for a place to land. He spotted a maid of sorts waving airport signals, clearly trying to gain their attention. She began to wave towards the

courtyard, and Tails saw that a makeshift landing strip had been established, and a very good one, too. Not only had a pavement been set down, but there were lights in the event of a nighttime arrival. And it was much longer than Tohsaka Mansion's backyard. After they landed, the maid approached, apparently hiding the signals in her dress.

"Welcome to Einzbern Castle," She greeted as Tails helped Rin off of Shirou's lap. She spoke in an even, almost emotionless voice. "I am Sella, one of Lady Illya's maids. Lady Illya sent me out here to greet you."

"Ah... Thank you" Shirou replied awkwardly. There was something about Sella's demeanor that was very off-putting. Or maybe he was still anxious from having the school idol on his lap. "We're glad to be here."

Sella nodded slightly. Her expression did not change, although her eyes did focus onto Tails after she finished talking to Shirou. She kept her gaze on Tails, even after the fox set Rin on the ground.

"Where is Illya-" Sella's gaze flickered towards Rin meaningfully, and the Mage reconsidered her words, albeit grudgingly. "- Lady Illya? Is she too busy to welcome her guests?"

Sella turned around and began to walk back towards the castle. Shirou, Tails, and Rin followed after her.

"Lady Illya is busy entertaining that blue *tanuki* who arrived here earlier, the one you call Sonic," Sella explained as they walked, "He's..." She trailed off, looking awkward. (Though it was hard to tell just from looking at the back of her head.)

"Sonic's what?" Tails asked, hovering up to Sella. "Did something happen?"

Sella sighed. "The first thing he did was slide down the banisters from the top of the main stairs to the bottom. In doing so, he knocked

several vases- priceless, irreplaceable -off of their pedestals. Before any of the vases could land on the floor, he caught every single one in the blink."

"Oh, good..." Shirou began, but Sella wasn't finished, apparently.

"And after leaving them on the floor for Leysritt and I to take care, he began to race around the castle. I can't be certain, but I think he went into every room, including the ones that were still being redecorated," The maid continued, sounding slightly more annoyed by the word. It was like listening to a tea kettle as the water heated up. "When we tracked him down, he had found Lady Illya's room and was going through her video game collection. He also somehow beat her high score on *Halo* . Now he has taken over the kitchen and is insisting on serving everyone some garish meal involving sausages and hot sauce."

"He...he was only a few minutes ahead of us..." Shirou breathed while Rin palmed her forehead. Tails just laughed.

"Lady's exaggerating," Sonic confided at Shirou's other side. He munched on a chili dog. "I only nicked those vases, they didn't fall," Everyone except Tails jumped. He held out a second chili dog to Shirou. "Any takers? Berserker ate the rest."

Shirou awkwardly took the chili dog from Sonic. After a moment of trepidation, bit into it. After the traditional Japanese breakfast he had earlier, the spicy Western fast food was an...interesting contrast. But, he didn't want to offend his friend by refusing. As he chewed slowly, Sonic began to talk.

"I checked this place over and haven't found any possible traps," Sonic whispered to Shirou, "So, I *think* she's serious about working with us, but, uh, might wanna watch out anyway."

"What do you mean?" Shirou asked as they entered the castle. The minute every single one of them were inside, the doors slammed shut, followed by the ominous sound of a lock clicking.

"Hello, *Onii-chan*. " Standing at the top of the stairs was the Master of the Einzbern Clan, Illyasviel von Einzbern. Standing at her left side was Berserker. At her right was a maid who was virtually identical to Sella, Leysritt. Berserker was chewing on a chili dog.

"Welcome to my home," Illya stated, smiling like a cat who ate the canary. "I'm so glad you could *join us*... "

Saber screamed in pain, despite her best efforts not. Multicolored lightning danced around the captured knight, stinging her body, scorching her hair. The echoes of her pained shrieks bounced off of the walls of the dark chamber. Beneath Saber's form a magic circle spun about. Caster stood in front of the lady knight, shaking her head in disappointment.

"Really, Saber, You're only delaying the inevitable," The witch said chidingly, as if scolding a child who didn't want to eat their vegetables. "Thanks to the Chaos Emerald, I now have exponential reserves of Prana to tap into. If you hope to wear me out with this pitiful resistance, then you shall be sorely disappointed. Just give in."

The lightning ceased and Saber's body went limp, still hanging in the air thanks to her bindings. Panting, Saber struggled to look up so she could glare defiantly at her captor. Unfortunately, her hair had become undone, so a messy net of golden strands had fallen over her eyes. Nonetheless, Saber did her best despite having hands tied behind back, forced into a humiliating hunch, and dressed in a revealing white dress.

" *Never*, " Saber gasped vindictively, "As long I can, I will defy you," She paused to take a breath. "As a knight, and a king, I will never bow to your will..."

But Caster smiled. "Ahh, that's right. Your true identity is King Arthur. I saw you destroy that mad doctor's airship, you know. I wonder how defiant you'll be when I start using anti *-dragon* magic?"

As the lightning and screams began anew, Archer stood just outside the chamber. His expression was troubled. He had long felt his ability to express anything other than sarcasm had been bled out by time, effort, and gracious amounts of bloodshed. However, hearing the tortures his former Servant was going through bothered him. Whatever piece of his soul that hadn't been blistered by the duties of a Counter Guardian told Archer that it was *wrong* to just idly stand by while a woman he once loved was being electrocuted. However, it wasn't that he had much of a choice. While the Archer-class' Independent Action ability gave him a measure of freedom, Caster would either send a familiar or teleport to his location the minute he tried to invoke it. With the Chaos Emerald, she had power to spare and the skill to keep that power from overwhelming her. It probably helped that she had plenty of Magecraft to energize now. The minute she lost control of Taiga, Caster had used her Territory Creation to transform her lair underneath the Ryuudou Temple into...well, something that would give M.C. Escher a headache. It was the kind of labyrinth that would require at least a dozen balls of magic thread to navigate. It reminded Archer a little of Shirou's description of a Special Zone. The only reason she wasn't adding *more* twists to the distorted workshop was that now her focus was entirely on forcing Saber to submit. And given how proud and stubborn both ladies were, it was not a stalemate that could be resolved readily.

Archer was brought of his thoughts by a strange squishing noise. Projecting a simple sword, he unleashed arcane might onto yet another starfish-monster that had crept into Caster's Temple. More and more of the strange entities described by Sonic were turning up. Rin had claimed that the Caster from the Fourth War might have been re-summoned (A theory that was now proven wrong), or that it was a Caster with a similar spell selection. But after some prodding, it became apparent that the witch currently electrocuting Saber wasn't behind the starfish.

Every time I see one, I'm reminded of that weird shadow person who turned into Shirou, Archer thought, Is he responsible for these things?

"Oh? Your own Servant abandoned you? My, my, Miss Tohsaka, not even your father would summon a Servant who could betray him." Illya purred, pretending to hide a laugh.

Rin's eyebrow twitched as a vein. "As opposed to the Einzbern, whose Servants fail to take any initiative at all..."

Sonic let the dialogue wash over him. The "Alliance" was currently having a meeting in a dinning hall, seated at one of those long tables where you needed a long-range radio just to ask someone to pass the ketchup. As Illya and Rin went through the traditional trade of barbs, put-downs, and excuses, he continued to think about what he had seen in Illya's room.

Ever since he had first saw Illya, the little Master had always made Sonic a bit uneasy. Years of playing it cool had allowed Sonic to keep that unease from showing, but there was something about her that was troubling. No matter how playful and innocent she presented herself, Illya had a darkness...a foreboding maturity that reminded him of his "faker" Shadow the Hedgehog. Plus, there was her strange obsession with Shirou. According to Saber, Illya first appeared trying to murder Shirou, only to give up at the last minute. And there was no way Saber and Archer combined could have beaten Berserker that night. Illya had her own reasons for sparing the red-haired Master.

Sonic then felt his fur tingle, and realized that Tails was showing Illya the Chaos Emerald.

"That *is* powerful," Illya conceded, "If Caster has one, that would explain the huge amount of Prana being generated from the Temple."

Illya reached out to touch the gem, but stopped at the last minute. Her entire body trembled, as a Mage's natural impulse to attain power battled against survival instincts. She instinctively sensed the improbable potency of the Chaos Emerald, and it called to her like a

giant red button labeled "DO NOT PUSH: END-OF-THE-WORLD BUTTON".

Tails got the hint and quickly closed the lead-lined lunch box, snapping the clasps shut.

"Better not touch it," Tails said, "The energy might be more than you can handle."

"What we really need to do is figure out how to stop the energy Caster's harnessing," Rin said, "Even if we pull Prana from our Chaos Emerald, we'll still be matching our Magecraft against a witch from the Age of the Gods."

After demonstrating his Projected Rule Breaker to Rin, it became apparent who Caster was; Medea, a woman from Greek Mythology, famed as a witch of who killed her own brother. Her Noble Phantasm was the same dagger she used to do the deed as a human being. And all of the Mages knew that during that time period, Magecraft was far more powerful- the True Magics being more commonplace than during modern times. With a Chaos Emerald, Caster would be able to perform those Magics like card tricks.

"It's too bad you didn't bring one of those reverse-Emeralds with you," Shirou said to Sonic, recalling a story Sonic once told. Upon seeing Rin and Illya's baffled looks, he explained. "Sonic told me that he and Tails destroyed one of Eggman's weapons with a different kind of gem," He looked back at Sonic. "Isn't that what happened?"

Sonic grinned, snapping his fingers. "That's right...hey! Who says we can't do that now? Tails! Think you can make another one?"

"Maybe..." Tails pulled out his Miles Electric.

"Hold it! What are you guys talking about?" Rin said, standing up. She marched over to Tails' seat, as did the rest of the team, save Sonic.

"As part of experiment, I siphoned some energy from a Chaos Emerald and then, ran it through a *blah blah blah tech stuff, blah blah blah*- "

"STOP!" Rin shouted, unable to take it. When she realized that everyone was staring at her, she cleared her throat. "So, basically, you placed a portion of the Emerald's power in a separate container, and then...inverted the energy so its frequency is the exact opposite of the source? So the two cancel each other out?"

Tails beamed. "Right!" His ears then drooped. "But, the equipment I used is still back home..."

Rin smirked. "Tails, please. You don't need any gadgets when you have the Head of the Tohsaka Clan, Master of Jewel-Magecraft, at your side."

"And *I* can craft an appropriately sized container," Illya stated, not wanting to be left out. "It will be superior to any pebble a plebeian like Tohsaka can afford."

" *Plebeian?! Why you little...* "

As the two Mages bickered (With Tails trying to mediate, unsuccessfully) Shirou glanced at Sonic. The Hedgehog was grinning, and flashed Shirou a thumbs-up, which the Mage returned. But Sonic's smile dropped and he jerked his thumb over his shoulder. Shirou frowned, and looked back at the girls and Tails. They were too busy talking. Getting up, he and Sonic left the meeting as quiet as possible.

"... *So, that's where the castle is,* " Shinji said dully. His eyes were unfocused and his entire body was slightly red. He spoke into the Eggman Electric. " *I d'n't think there's anyone besides Illya and Berserker there, but di'n't have time check...* "

"No matter. Excellent work, Shinji," Eggman congratulated, twirling his mustache. Had he studied finance, he would have closed a dozen mortgages with that one motion. "Focus your efforts on determining the identities and locations of the other Servants."

Shinji nodded dumbly, and then slumped off-screen. Orbot's visage appeared as the perspective tilted slightly. Shinji must have dropped the communicator.

"He's been like that ever since this morning at breakfast," Orbot said, nodding in Shinji's direction. "And we don't know why."

Cubot shoved his head into view. "Spent three hours in the bathroom, running the shower at top temperature," He said, "Kept crying 'All those times!' like some kind of glitchy sound file."

Eggman sighed, rubbing his forehead. "Great, just we need in this organization, more teen angst. I thought we were through with that when Shadow left. Well, try and keep Shinji on-track. I'm going to get our 'Holy Grail'. Eggman out!"

Eggman hung up and turned towards the hanger bay. It was starting to look a little lonely, what with the destruction of his Sub-bosses. He rubbed his chin in thought. For this operation to work, he would need more than the usual horde of Badniks to accompany him. In order to get Illya away from her titanic pet. But from what Orbot, Cubot, and Shinji had said, the Servant Berserker was strength incarnate. Simply trying to destroy it would yield nothing.

"Looks like I'm going to have to do a few modifications before I leave..." Eggman murmured, grinning evilly.

And the estate is empty? Kirie asked telepathically, his teeth gritting.

Exactly, Lancer responded, *I've been over the entire neighborhood three times. Apparently, The Master of Saber told his girlfriend that*

he'll be out of town for a while. That blabbermouth teacher from the high school was talking about it to her grandfather.

So Shirou decided that his own home was no longer safe. That was understandable. During the Fourth War, Tohsaka Tokiomi had his family sent away so he could focus on the War effort. For all the good it did him in the end. Still, that Shirou made his own escape was more than Kirie had expected of the boy. He was irritatingly resolute when it came to trying to defend the bland, ordinary people of the city. However, with the sudden explosion in Prana coming from the Ryuudou Temple, perhaps Saber convinced Shirou that it would better to retreat and draw away Caster's focus from the suburbs. That was more likely.

Has there been any sign of Rider? Kirie asked. He hadn't heard any reports of people being molested.

None. Wherever she is, she's- Augh!

What is it? Kirie didn't like the way Lancer ended his statement.

Another one of these creepy starfish things! I hate them , where do they keep coming from?

Kirie didn't answer. He had long suspected that the source of the abominations were connected with Matou Zouken's twisted experiments. However, with his work trying to cover up (Or at least limit the exposure of) Sonic's activities, he hadn't been able to look into that situation much. However, he hoped to change that with this visit. It was high time to pull rank and have Rin's help take care of that outrageous blue meddler...or at the very least, get that phone and its incriminating pictures.

Kotomine Kirie arrived at the entrance of the Tohsaka Mansion, and unlocked the door. As Rin's official caretaker, he had a spare key available. And as Rin's guardian *and* her ally in maintaining the secrecy of Magecraft in Fuyuki...

Hmm? Something was wrong. The door wasn't opening. Annoyed, Kirie tried his key again. For a moment, he thought that it had simply jammed, but no, the key turned smoothly, and he heard the bolt click. But for some reason, the door was jammed. While there was a chance that Rin had formed a new Magecraft to keep him out, Kirie didn't sense any Prana on the door-

Wait. There was something on the door. It was a high-tech gadget of some kind, a metal block the size of a brick. It only had a single light on it, and the light was red.

Where'd this come from? Kirie thought, Is this thing the reason I can't get in?

Rin hated technology. Partially because it went against Magecraft tradition, but mostly because she was really bad at it. So how did this device end up on her mansion? A quick check around the perimeter showed that the other entrances had similar gadgets attached. While Kirie *could* just knock them off with his own strength, he decided to hold off on that for now. Instead, he examined the backyard. There were imprints in the grass that suggested something large and heavy had been resting there once.

So this was where they hid the plane, Kirie thought, Judging from the stains on the grass, they were covering it with a tarp. Ordinarily, something would have been noticed, but the Boundary Field keeps most people from coming here...

Clk

Kirie sighed. *Except for robots. Normal Boundary Fields are about as effective against machines as bug spray against fish.*

The priest turned around, ready to destroy another Badnik that had clearly wandered onto the property. Besides that giant one Gilgamesh destroyed, smaller robots had also approached the church. Whenever one got inside, Kirie had to spend valuable

plotting time destroying it. Eventually, the other robots began to see the pattern and from then on only wandered around the perimeter.

The priest let a few Black Keys fly, and the sound of machinery exploding filled the air as they struck. Annoyed that he wasn't going to find Sonic or something use against him, Kirie turned and left abruptly. Had he bothered to take a closer look at the smoldering heap of metal, he would have seen a few incongruities;

1) No animal came crawling or flying from the wreckage, as per the norm.

2) Secondly, unlike Dr. Eggman's usual designs, this one was rather mundane and basic.

"Did you see that?" Stuart asked Dr. Twice as they reviewed the footage taken from the Tohsaka Mansion.

Twice replayed the video several times at slower and slower frame rates. Even then, Kirie's motions were still a blur.

"I can't believe an ordinary man could move like that," Twice confessed, "And what was that weapon? A knife?"

Stuart didn't say anything. While he would have liked to increase surveillance on the priest, the task force's resources were starting to become stretched thin, due to research on the abnormal energy fields, the strange creatures being sighted (Twice had a few stuffed in jars made of ultra-thick glass), as well as keeping an eye out for Dr. Eggman's latest attack.

So he had no other choice than to simply ponder...was the man who benefited the most from Tohsaka Tokiomi's passing a friend, or enemy of young Rin? And this was on top of sighting of Tohsaka returning home, along with Tails and Emiya. They had apparently stopped by to retrieve some equipment from the Mansion before

leaving in the plane. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough evidence that anyone was doing anything illegal. *Yet.*

"Have we tracked the plane?" Stuart asked another agent passing by.

"Yes, sir. As far as we can tell, it was heading towards the area owned by the Einzbern family."

The Einzberns...Kiritsugu's old clients...

Sonic led Shirou back out to the courtyard. As soon as Shirou was in the center, Sonic zipped back and shut the doors. Once he finished, he returned to the center with Shirou.

Rubbing his nose, Sonic said, "Okay, Shirou, with Saber indisposed, it's up to me to get you in shape."

"You're going to spar with me?" Shirou asked, getting excited. While he wanted Saber back more than anything, he wouldn't deny that being trained by a modern hero would be a dream come true.

Sonic laughed, "No way! I'd thought we go out for a jog instead."

"A-" Shirou barely had time to process this statement when Sonic became a blur. Within a fraction of a second Shirou felt something tap his shoulder, before seeing a gust of wind vanish into the forest beyond. Moments later, the words "Catch me if you can!" drifted into Shirou's ears. "-Jog?" Shirou finished.

Of *course* Sonic's idea of a training meant taking off into the woods at high velocity. Nonetheless, a diligent student did not question his teacher, and so Shirou ran off after Sonic. Thankfully, the Hedgehog was easy to track. All Shirou needed to do was follow the small trench Sonic's rapid footsteps made into a forest. However, Shirou felt that simply trailing Sonic wasn't enough. There had been a challenge too. Channeling Prana into his legs, Shirou took

Reinforced strides, rocketing across the path Sonic was carving through the forest.

"Saber's been a little worried about you, y'know!" Sonic yelled- from *behind!*

Shirou's heels dug into the ground as he tried to turn as quickly as possible. He almost fell over from the sudden shift in direction, but managed to stay upright. As he ran, he saw that Sonic was now sitting in the branch of a tree. He was barely halfway towards the Hedgehog before Sonic stood up and zipped over Shirou's head.

"Actually, there's something I wanted to talk to you about," Sonic called as he raced away, "Didn't want one of the girls to listen in!"

Shirou stopped- and instantly felt the Prana go out of his legs. His concentration broke and the Reinforcement spell wore off. As he ran to chase Sonic, Shirou recast the spell.

_ _ m t _ e b _ n _ _ my sword

Shirou began to feel the strength return to his legs, and the distance between him and Sonic began to close. However, he could see that while Shirou was putting every ounce of his Prana into running, to Sonic this was nothing more than a casual jog. Heck, he began *moonwalk* at the speed of a fired bullet!

"See, Saber told me that whenever she slept, she gets a peek at your past," Sonic explained, "And from what she's seen, you- Whoa!"

Sonic had tripped over a rock. But he was moving so quickly that falling over didn't slow him down. Instead, he curled into a ball that rolled along until it hit a root and bounced into the air. Sonic landed back on his with all the ease of a world-class gymnast.

"Anyway, where was I?" Sonic dusted himself off, "Oh, right!"

Sonic took off like a rocket again, this time zipping off the path and through the maze of trees. Shirou charged after him, struggling to keep his pace in spite of the uneven terrain and the burning sensation that was beginning to grow in his legs.

"She's just bothered by the fact that you're a suicidal doormat who won't take care of himself!" Sonic called as he swung around a tree.

This again... Shirou thought as he struggled to keep up. He yelled "There's nothing wrong with helping others!" back at Sonic, only to realize that the Hedgehog had already veered off to the left. Never mind keeping up, just keeping *track* of Sonic was a challenge in itself!

"No argument there," Sonic replied, "But you've got a real problem with working other people, don't ya?"

Uh oh. It was worse than Shirou could imagine. Sonic the Hedgehog was *psychoanalyzing him*. Now the young Mage had new motivation to catch the off-worlдер. So he could make Sonic stop talking.

Sonic did an amazing flip off of a tree branch and landed on an old stump several yards away. Shirou charged, and was amazed that Sonic wasn't moving. But just as the Hedgehog was within arm's reach-

Whooosh!

Shirou felt the wind nearly knock him off his feet as Sonic speeded past him. As he regained his footing, he tried to think. It was possible that Sonic was only saying his words to distract Shirou. But there was an edge to his tone that the young Mage could not ignore. Like the tip of a dull blade digging into the back of his neck.

Sonic, for his part, was not fond of introspect. He didn't dwell on much, he didn't mope. If something bothered him, he would try to fix it as soon as possible. Easy to do when you move faster than sound! But the more he got to know Shirou, through Saber, the more

worried he became. It was like watching Shadow the Hedgehog, minus the unrelenting rage towards the world. And the reason Shadow had been that way was because...

Oh, I get it. Sonic thought sadly. Shirou had survived the Great Fire that killed all of his friends and neighbors. Even though Shirou had claimed to have no memory of his old home and life, it was possible that he still held some grief...a sense of guilt for surviving while everyone else died.

"I mean, you didn't want Saber to fight," Sonic went on as Shirou chased him, "But when Bizarrokles came out to rumble, you jumped in and tried to get yourself killed!"

"I was trying to protect Saber!" Shirou shouted back, trying to ignore the burning in his lungs.

"By getting sliced in half? And what were you gonna do afterwards?" Sonic dove into a hollow stump and came out a hole several yards south. "I mean, Berserker was still there!"

Shirou began to feel a certain fire- and it was in his head. While he admired Sonic, the Hedgehog criticizing his actions made him angry. How *dare* Sonic talk, after all of the time he risked his own life. Projecting a sword, Shirou sent it flying at Sonic. He missed, but Shirou hadn't been aiming at Sonic directly- The blade landed several feet in front of Sonic, causing the Hedgehog to jump back slightly. Shirou allowed a grin- Okay, this was more like it!

But Sonic just turned around and gave Shirou a humorless look. "Look, not to make a big deal of it, but you can only 'die heroically'-" (He made the quotation marks with his fingers) "-just once. Might wanna keep that in mind next time you decide to jump in to save the day."

Shirou was inches away from catching Sonic when the Hedgehog shot up into the air. And just as he reached the apex of his ascent, Sonic did a Homing Shot and launched himself further away in the

forest. Whirling around, Shirou didn't even think about his next move- the Projected sword was already out of his hand and flying in Sonic's direction. It missed, but Shirou didn't let that get to him. He already knew that Sonic could move faster than anything he could Project would fly. But a good Archer knew how to compensate for a moving target.

And so, Shirou found himself chasing after Sonic and throwing Projected swords. While none hit their target, Shirou found he could control Sonic's path- slightly, -by forcing him to dodge. Not that it stopped Sonic from talking.

"...And you even got tweaked when Archer wanted to help out in the kitchen." Sonic continued as he flipped over a sword. The weapon was already fading out of existence before it even hit the Earth.

"What's your point?" Shirou shouted.

"My *point* is that you gotta learn to let people help out," Sonic explained, "Otherwise, you might not have any friends when you really *do* need help! Some guys get miffed if they're not allowed to be involved."

Sonic circled around Shirou at roughly fifty MPH. The whirlwind spun Shirou off of his feet, sending him falling into a tree. The throbbing in his head was only slightly mitigated by the dizziness...but not really. And the minute he stopped moving, the adrenalin rush was over. Shirou felt empty, worn...hot.

Like at the fire.

"I...I could have done something..." Shirou muttered as Sonic walked over to him.

Standing in front of Shirou, Sonic stared. He fought the urge to raise an eyebrow. It wouldn't have been appropriate.

"What? What could you have done?" Sonic asked.

"At...the Fire..." Shirou tried to stand up, but didn't have the strength.

All around him, everything was burning. Buildings, streets... people.

And those people were calling out to him. Begging for him.

But Shirou just walked on. Without pause. Without stopping.

Without helping.

"They needed help...and I didn't do anything..." Shirou muttered, once more failing to stand up.

Sonic cocked his head. "What are you talking about?"

And that's when Shirou told Sonic. About how his earliest memory was walking through that inferno. Forcing himself to ignore the screams and pleas of those who couldn't free themselves. Even though he could have...

"Whoa, easy there, cowboy," Sonic said, putting his hand on Shirou's shoulder. "So, basically, you feel guilty for not stopping by."

Shirou nodded.

Sonic sighed, and sat down. He didn't say anything for a moment. But once that moment passed, he said, "Shirou, I'm gonna let you in on a secret. One that I don't like admitting to *anyone* , not even Tails."

Shirou looked at Sonic.

"There have been people even I couldn't save."

Shirou blinked. "What?"

Sonic sighed. He *really* didn't like dealing with this introspective stuff, but sometimes you had to go the extra mile if you wanted to help a guy out of hole. Even if that hole was technically a psychological

disorder. "Look, I may be the Fastest Thing on Two Feet, but I can't be everywhere at once. And just because I manage to shut down Eggman's doomsday device of the week, there's no telling what kind of damage was caused before then. Heck, for all I know, my world could be in huge trouble, and I can't do anything about it because I'm *here* .

"But you can't let that kind of heavy thinking get you down," Sonic continued, "And you *can't* use a bad time in your life as an excuse to hurt yourself. It's not fair to all those people that died, and it won't bring them back."

Shirou looked up into the sky. He tried to let Sonic's words sink in, but for years he had believed he didn't have the right to pursue his own happiness. Even now...it just didn't feel correct. But before he could put more thought into it, Sonic's communicator beeped.

Sonic rolled his eyes and rolled his glove to better speak into it. "What's up, Tails?"

" *Sonic! Where are you and Shirou!?* "

"We just went for a run, what's wrong?" Sonic asked, concerned.

" *It's Eggman! He just dropped an army of robots and they're swarming over the castle!* " Tails sounded frantic as things exploded in the background.

"Got it. Be there in a few," Sonic hung up and looked Shirou, "Need a lift?"

Shirou nodded. He needed to get back to the Castle, and Sonic would get him there faster.

And there was no time for introspect.

Sonic and Shirou got back fast enough. The Einzbern Castle was a warzone. The Badnik army had all but completely conquered the land. Every corner and niche had either an Egg-Robo or an Orbinaut positioned, ready to attack. And in the courtyard were two giant mounds of white-ish, purple gunk, each with a maid head sticking out from the top. Both women were struggling to free themselves, but their gooey binds would not break.

Shirou ran up to Sella, but stopped short of actually touching her gunk. Meanwhile, Sonic zipped up to Leysritt and poked her goo with a stick.

"It's like an extra-thick serving of Mega-Mack," Sonic noted, "Lemme guess- Eggman's dirty work?"

Why did he have to say dirty? Shirou thought squeamishly. The strange substance coating the maids were unsettling enough to look at as they were. Reaching out, he tapped it with his finger as lightly as he could. *Trace On...*

"Yes," Leysritt stated. On the whole, she seemed only mildly unhappy about her situation, all things considered. "He arrived while riding this ridiculous, spider-like vehicle and demanded to see Lady Illya. When we tried to force his departure..." That's when she frowned. " ...*This* happened."

"Personally, I would bring a fruit basket as a housewarming gift," Sonic commented, trying to pull the stick free. After breaking house off, he threw it away and asked, "So, did you see which way Round, Bald, and Mustachy went?"

Leysritt gestured as best as she could, given her condition. "That way."

Sonic and Shirou turned and saw that, right next to the entrance was a giant hole in the wall.

Shirou felt a chill run up his body. *Illya...Rin!* The idea of either girl at Eggman's mercy made the red-haired Mage uneasy. And Rin had been captured once, and that was *with* Archer's assistance! While he knew Berserker was powerful, his Trace revealed the that "Extra-Thick Mega-Mack" had been specifically designed and capable of restraining locomotives at full speed.

Sonic nodded and turned to Shirou. "Right, I'll go and see if I can find Eggman and pull off his spider-legs. Shirou, you free the maids and then meet me inside. Also..." Sonic became a blur and the various robots that had been surrounding them exploded, releasing the critters trapped within. Once he was finished, Sonic shot ran towards the hole.

Shirou shook his head. *And this is after he gave me that talk about working with others.* He turned back to the maids and tried to figure out what to do. *If this stuff was hard, breaking it apart would be easy...I think. What can I do to dry it out quickly?*

"Behind you." Sella said.

Shirou looked around. Although Sonic had annihilated several Badniks easily, more were appearing to take their place. He took stock of what he had to deal with, and recalled entries on Tails' "Badnik Database".

Two Crabmeats, four Buzzbombers, two Egg Pawns... Shirou thought, and prepared himself. *I can do this. And maybe I can use their parts...*

Shirou's train of thought was derailed by a loud thump from behind. Cautiously, he turned around. Standing behind Sella and Leysritt was a robot roughly the size of the one that appeared in the neighborhood. It's armor was a beige color. It had a mostly rotund body, with a squat head sticking out from the top. And that head had a single, curved spike sticking out from the top. A pair of clawed hands hung limply at its side, and the entire structure stood up on a pair of piston-like legs.

E-4124: " *Spike* "

When he saw Spike's arm move, Shirou leapt away. The clawed hand crashed into the ground, conveniently destroying several of the Badniks that weren't nearly as quick on the uptake. (Shirou absent-mindedly noted a mix of squirrels, birds, and seals scampering away from the wreckage.)

Shirou swallowed. Okay. This might be harder than he thought.

The worst part about Dr. Eggman's latest assault was the timing. Tails, Rin, and Illya had been on the verge of figuring out a Magecraft variation on Tails' Anti-Emerald formula when the Castle's Boundary Field alerted them to Dr. Eggman's approach. Unfortunately, like *every other Field* in the city, the one surrounding the Castle completely failed to detect the *rest* of Eggman's invasion force. So, they were a little unprepared for the Badniks when Illya went out to confront Eggman herself.

Tails smashed an Orbinaut, and used the recoil to crash into a Buzzbomber, freeing a squirrel and a bunny rabbit. As he landed on the floor, Rin unleashed an impressive roundhouse kick against an Egg-Robo, sending it flying against another Egg-Robo. As a pair of crows flew free, Tails saw something that made his heart stop- A Crabmeat had the Emerald's container in its pincer!

"Oh, snap!" Tails yelled, and went into a Spin Dash before rocketing into the Badnik.

The container went flying from the wreckage and flew into the air, colliding with a Butteroid. The Butteroid wasn't damaged, but its flight was altered just enough so that it crashed into a Technomouse crawling along the wall. Tails caught the container before it landed on the floor and looked around. The ballroom he and the girls had been using as their "proving ground" was almost clear of robots, but cracks were forming in not just the walls, but also the ceiling. Only the floor, which had been decorated with elaborate runes and

interweaving spell sigils, seemed to be unaffected by the battle. However, every now and then a force from above shook the ceiling, causing the chandelier to rattle ominously.

"Rin!" Tails yelled, dodging the spike balls of another Orbinaut. "Let's get out of here before the entire castle comes down on us!"

"How!?" Rin snapped, heaving. Her cheeks were flushed from both anger and exhaustion. "That stupid geezer's machine gummed up the doors!"

Oh, right. Not long after Illya went out to confront Dr. Eggman's Mobile-of-the-Day had gotten into the castle and immediately began sealing up every other entrance with his Eggmobile's Mega Mack. Tails and Run had been securing the ritual room when he trapped them inside with several dozen Badniks.

There was another tremor from above, shaking the castle. A crack appeared on a wall, intersecting with another crack that formed previously. This gave Tails an idea.

"Rin, hold on to this." Tails called, tossing the box to Rin. Landing on the floor, he went into a Spin Dash. Once a sufficient charge had been built up, Tails shot at the cracked wall.

CRASH!

Tails rubbed his head and wobbled as he stood up. It was at times like that he really wished he had quills like Sonic or Knuckles. Most of the time his twin-tails took the brunt of the force, but every now and then he ended up making contact with his noggin.

Clutching the container like her firstborn, Rin stepped out of the wall and looked around. "No robots here. Are you okay, Tails?"

Tails nodded, shaking away the headache. "I'm fine. Let's get outta here!"

Sonic didn't bother checking any of the Mack'd-up doors as he sped around Einzbern Castle. He knew that Eggman wouldn't bother with any entrance built for normal humans. Instead, he stopped for holes in the wall clearly made by Berserker- or the mech of the day.

Checking one such hole almost got his head chopped off when a Crabmeat stuck its pincer out at neck level.

"Whoa!" Sonic cried, jumping back. He rebounded off of a wall and hit the Crabmeat with a Homing Shot. As a chipmunk scampered for freedom, Sonic heard another loud tremor shaking the castle's foundation. Some plaster fell from the ceiling and bounced off of a quill. He looked up and smirked.

"Gee, I wonder who *that* could be." Sonic muttered, rubbing the space under his nose.

Sonic took off. He stopped, realized that he was going back the way he entered and turned around. Zipping throughout the corridors, Sonic saw a window and smirked.

Nowhere the go but up... He thought, and launched himself through the glass.

Amid the explosions and shaking, the shattering sound was barely a whisper. Landing expertly on the ledge, Sonic ran along the castle's wall. Spying a swarm of Buzzbombers flying from the east, he smirked. Running along the ledge, he leapt and performed a Homing Shot on each of them, propelling himself higher into the air with each strike. On the last and final Badnik, Sonic shot towards one of the Castle's towers. Landing on the slanted roof he began to rush around, spiraling up until he reached the very top. That gave him a perfect view of the battle between titans.

What a showdown, Sonic thought, A dimensionally-displaced doctor in his spider-car versus a tiny witch and her pet monster. Wait a minute- Sonic squinted and shielded his eyes for a better look. *Where's Illya? Uh oh.*

Illya was born the most powerful Mage of her generation. Though the term "born" was slightly inaccurate. While she had parents, she was essentially a homunculus created from the enchanted sperm of her father, and placed in the modified womb of her mother. And even though she started life as a baby, she had been a baby that was altered to carry the highest concentration of Mage Circuits of any Master in both the present War and past ones.

Her father once told Illya that the common flaw among Mages was too much faith in their own abilities. Or rather, the assumption that their mastery of Magecraft made them immune to more mundane forms of combat, such as high-caliber rifle or time bombs. (His on the whole successful career as an assassin of Mages while possessing low-level Magecraft seemed to support this.) The Einzbern Clan patriarch, however, insisted that all anyone needed to win was immense Thaumaturgical power, which was why they summoned the mighty Herakles as a Berserker. If you possessed sufficient force, then any strategy would be meaningless. He then spent the ten years leading to the Fifth War hammering this belief into Illya, making her hate both him and her father for betraying the Clan and instigating this treatment.

Trapped in a metal clamp that wrapped around her entire body and forced to ride shotgun to Dr. Eggman, Illya found herself wishing that Grandpa hadn't been so quick to reject dad's advice.

Illya stepped out and stared down the approaching horde. She wasn't surprised that Eggman had brought another army, along with the giant robot Spike. After all, he did the same thing when attacking the Homurahara Academy, so why wouldn't he do any less when invading her domain?

As her maids flanked Illya, Dr. Eggman threw up his arms in mock amazement. "My, what prompt timing! And I didn't even ring the doorbell."

"As representative of the Einzbern Clan, I welcome you," Illya greeted in her saccherine-mocking tone reserved for enemies, curtsying. Looking up, she smirked evilly. "And I will do my best to keep you... entertained. "

Eggman sneered, unimpressed. "Skip the entertainment. You've got something I want."

Illya was equally unimpressed. "The Chaos Emerald, right? Sadly, we need it for our own plans, so you will just have to go home."

Eggman's eyebrows shot up. "Oh-ho-ho! So, you've got a Chaos Emerald, do you? Excellent!" The legs of the Egg Spider straightened, and a cannon built on the underneath extended. "I can kill two birds with one stone!"

But Illya merely yawned. "You really have no idea where you are, do you, grandpa? Leysritt, Stella, end them"

Illya turned away as her maids swung into action. All though the two were considered failures as far as homunculous were concerned, they still possessed physical abilities comparable to Servants. The sounds of metal carnage filling the air were replaced by two loud squelching sounds. Confused, Illya turned back to see both Stella and Leysritt being covered in piles of gross, icky, goo. Before she could process this, a metal hand popped out of the Egg Spider and took hold.

"Berse-MMPH!" Illya tried to scream before the metal squeezed. Still, she didn't need vocal commands. Just being in danger was enough to bring Berserker out. Seeing his charge captured, the corrupted spirit of Herakles released a bellow of rage and charged. Ax raised high, Berserker moved to not just free Illya, but to also beat Eggman into a scrambled pulp.

Then Spike got in his way and everything went off-script.

Catching Berserker in its claws, Spike's torso immediately spun around and used the momentum to throw the Servant over the castle's walls. The brute instantly burst through the stone and bore down on his enemies, but Eggman's automatic systems were already in action. The Egg Spider's cannon fired, and the thick Mega Mack struck Berserker's foot and the ground. The gunk stretched out, taut, and then...broke. Berserker, however, had been knocked off-balance by the elasticity, and the recoil sent him stumbling into a statue. In that time, the Egg Spider was already smashing its way into the castle.

"Badniks! Find that Emerald!" Eggman ordered.

Berserker had given chase, of course, and eventually forced the Egg Spider onto the castle's roof. Therein lay the problem. In his haste to save his Master, Berserker had knocked several of the castle's interior walls down- and was now doing the same to the roof.

While Berserker was incapable of acting rationally or tactically, he wasn't completely stupid. It took at least a dozen tries, but Berserker eventually realized that Dr. Eggman would keep gluing his feet to the floor. And while his maddened mind couldn't quite figure out the long term danger (namely, that he was ripping the castle to pieces), it did point out that he wasn't accomplishing his short term of crushing Eggman.

Roaring, Berserker swung his arm down and let go of his sword. It would have pulverized Eggman's head on contact, except for one problem. His hand had been covered in Mega Mack. the adhesive stretched out, going taut *just before* impact. ("Gah!" Eggman shrieked, ducking down.) The recoil sent the sword flying direct back at Berserker, nailing him right in the head!

Eggman cautiously looked up and saw Berserker stumbling back- with the sword sticking out of his forehead. Having already been forewarned about the Servant's apparent invulnerability by Shinji, he was a bit perplexed by Berserker's injury. His confusion cleared

when Berserker ripped the sword out and the giant gaping wound closed instantly.

"O- *ho!* A high-speed regeneration ability! So *that's* you're secret!" Eggman exclaimed, intrigued more than anything.

If Eggman had been a Master, he would have been given an explanation from the Holy Grail itself that in recognition of the Twelve Tasks Herakles performed in life, the Servant Berserker had been granted twelve lives to live. And each rebirth made Berserker immune to the cause of the previous "death". Of course, Eggman wasn't a Master. He also wasn't paying attention to what was coming at him from behind.

"Surprise, Egg-head!"

Sonic rammed into the Egg Spider, Spinball style. The impact jostled the cockpit, throwing Eggman off-balance. Sonic performed a Homing Shot on the clamp holding Illya, looseing its grip on her. The little Masterfell into Sonic's arms. Before Eggman could get his bearings, Sonic zipped over to Berserker and placed Illya at his feet. The giant looked down on the two, stoic, but with an eyebrow raised.

"I'll take over from here, Gigantor," Sonic stated, giving the slightly-dizzy Illya a pat on the back. "Why don't you get Thumbelina here some fresh air?"

Nodding, Berserker scooped up his Master and leapt off the castle roof. With them gone, Sonic turned back to Eggman and brushed his quills.

"Kidnapping magic princesses?" Sonic asked tauntingly, "Geez, whatever happened originality?"

Eggman shook an angry fist at Sonic. "I don't have time witty banter today, Sonic! Get out of my way!"

Sonic took his stance, preparing to move. "Oh? Got somewhere to be?"

"I'll be squashing your head if I have to!" Eggman snarled, and directed the Egg Spider at his blue-spined nemesis.

Eight giant robot legs stomped towards Sonic, each one intended to make good on Eggman's threat. Not that they could, as Sonic easily swerved around the metal arachnid, and once he was behind the Egg Spider, Sonic landed a Homing Shot on Eggman's cockpit.

Growling with irritation, Eggman spun the Egg Spider around and brought the Gunk Cannon (Patent Pending) to bare. Three shots of Extra-Thick Mega Mack shot out and were on a direct course to where Sonic *used* to be. The Hedgehog zipped around the roof as soon as he saw the Cannon, and landed another Homing Shot on the Egg Spider. The Egg Spider tried to retaliate with a headlong charge, but Sonic easily jumped over the approaching mecha and hit Eggman's cockpit *again!*

"Argh!" Eggman shouted, furiously jerking his yoke. "Stop doing that!"

"Are you kidding?" Sonic laughed as he circled around the Egg Spider, "I could do this all day!"

It was probably karmic, or maybe just ironic, that Sonic hit a weak spot on the roof and his foot became stuck. Consequently, this caused him to face plant onto the tile. Seeing his nemesis unable to move, Eggman eagerly aimed his Cannon and fired a round of Mega Mack at Sonic. Sonic yelped and ducked, and thankfully the goo soared over his head. Frustrated, Eggman spurred the Egg Spider at Sonic, who freed himself from the roof and jumped over the vehicle.

"Note to self; Watch for potholes." Sonic muttered before hitting the Egg Spider with another Homing Shot.

As the cockpit shook from the force of Sonic's attack, Eggman furiously hit a button that had a spiral printed on it. A pillar on the Egg Spider's center lowered, lifting the vehicle up as the legs reached out. The Egg Spider began to spin around, whipping the legs out like the blades on a gigantic and ugly blender. Sonic felt the wind pull him in, and ran in the opposite direction to avoid being crushed by the legs. After a few minutes, the spinning slowed to a stop, and Sonic nearly ran off of the roof. Curving around to stay on, Sonic launched himself at the Egg Spider and hit it with a Homing Shot.

Shaken out of his dizziness, Eggman gripped the yoke and pushed the red button on top. The Egg Spider jumped high into the air, and with a quick downward thrust from its jets, slammed down on where Sonic *used* to be.

"Hold still!" Eggman snarled, and had the Egg Spider jump up and down in a desperate attempt to squash Sonic.

Sonic didn't bother retorting this time. He just zigged and zagged, keeping away from eight metal stomping feet. He was also taking note of the cracks forming in the roof surface...

Better finish this up quick, or there won't be a castle left to defend! Sonic thought, and ran towards the roof's east side. When the Egg Spider landed again, one of its legs suddenly broke through the roof, crashing through the same small spot Sonic stepped in.

"Blast!" Eggman yelled.

"My thoughts exactly!" Sonic exclaimed eagerly, and raced towards the Egg Spider.

The Egg Spider's cannon spun about and fired several globs of Mega Mack, but Sonic dodged each one. Curling into a Spinball, Sonic rammed the Egg Spider's side.

That was the last straw. So many impacts caused smoke to seep out of the machinery. A horrible whining noise could be heard. Alerts

beeped on Eggman's console. The extra legs on the Egg Spider crackled with electricity, then began to explode. The Egg Mobile detached the appendages, flying away as Dr. Eggman cursed.

"I hate that Hedgehog!" filled the air as the Egg Mobile became a speck on the horizon.

Sonic shook his head, then looked around. *Now, I wonder how Shirou's doing...*

Shirou, as it turned out, had fallen into something of a rut. Thanks to his rapt attention to Sonic's stories, he had quickly figured out a method for dealing with Spike. The key to destroying Eggman's larger, more powerful robots, wasn't to rush.

The key was to wait. Wait for an opportune moment. Even the most deadliest foe had a weakpoint, and would in time expose it of their own violation.

Spike's main tactic was to spin his upper-body around, attempting to bludgeon his target with his whirling claws. Whenever it did this, the robot was impossible to approach or even attack. However, after several moments, the joints would lock up, and Spike would be paralyzed momentarily. And when that happened, Shirou would rush over to cast one spell, over and over again.

" *Structural Analysis* ."

And through the method, Shirou figured out Spike's main weakness. Projecting a bow and arrow, he would target the joints at the sub-boss' middle, where the legs and the rotating torso met.

Of course, he also had to dodge the remaining Badniks, so it wasn't as if Shirou could passively enact this strategy easily. Thankfully, Leyritt and Sella, while still cocooned, could help warn Shirou whenever one came out from-

"Behind you." Leysritt announced in her monotone.

Shirou jumped forward just in time to avoid being bisected by a Crabmeat claw. He spun around and threw a Projected sword. It wasn't a well-developed one, barely sword-shaped energy, but it still shattered one of the robot crab's eye stalks. Gasping, Shirou ducked to the side as an Orbitnaut nearly got him with a spike-ball.

I can't keep this up forever, Shirou thought, I can barely cast spells as it is!

Shirou looked around, trying to find something that could turn the tide. He spotted a red orbitnaut, but instead of spike-balls, it had balls of fire orbiting around it.

Fire...that's it!

When Shirou did Structural Analysis on the Mega-Mack pile, he learned (besides an *intense* chemistry lesson) was that while the Mega-Mack would remain sticky while moist, exposure to open flames would cause the substance to harden. While it would be a long shot, at the very least Shirou could free the maids and they could escape.

Digging his feet into the ground, Shirou ran towards the Gohla. He knew he had to time it just right, otherwise this stunt would blow up in his face. Literally.

I Am The Bone _ _ _

The *Tora-shinai* appeared in his hands. Shirou had to focus all of his remaining Prana to complete it. As its history flowed into his mind and body, Shirou leapt at the Gohla. Four balls of fire flew towards him, and the *Tora-shinai* lashed out.

With the batting average of a clean-up hitter, Shirou struck each of the fireballs and knocked them back towards the maids. The fire-

spewing orbs were out of control, but they struck both mounds. Two for each of them. The effect was instantaneous. Fire seemed to wash over the Mega-Mack, but it went out as soon as it spread. Once the flames were gone, Leysritt and Sella were covered in soot.

Shirou winced. He hadn't intended to burn the maids. "Sorry about that!"

Shirou didn't have time to regret his methods too harshly. Gripping the *Tora-Shinai*, he charged back at the maids...

CRASH!

...Which was when Spike suddenly dropped down, becoming a massive, metal wall between Mage and maid. Spike swiped one of his massive claws at Shirou, forcing the young Mage backwards.

Ahh! Damn it! Shirou thought, stumbling back to avoid the blow. He held up the False *Tora-Shinai* as if that would do anything. By the sheerest of miracles, Spike's clawed imbedded into the earth, becoming stuck. Getting an idea, Shirou put his hand on the robot limb and did a Structural Analysis.

Information flew into Shirou's mind, and his body flew through the air as Spike freed itself. Shirou felt his bones rattle as he hit the ground. Despite his shaking, he forced himself up. He no longer had the Projected weapon in his hand. In fact, he had no Prana to speak of. Desperately, he grabbed a piece of shrapnel off of the ground and ran towards one of the maid's prisons. Once he was close enough, he began to hammer the metal into the Mega-Mack- thankfully, now dry, the substance began to crack easily.

"Stand back." Leysritt said calmly.

There was an explosion and the maid was out of the Mega-Mack. She had just *jumped* out, shattering the mold. Shirou fell on his rear from the force of the maid's escape. He watched in amazement as Leysritt rushed at Spike. When the robot swung at the maid, Leysritt

deftly jumped over it, and seemingly began to *hover in the air*, missing Spike's second swipe. She then landed a kick that apparently caused the robot's head to rattle.

"I will support." A voice said, and Shirou turned to see that Sella had gotten out of her own mold as well. The force of Leysritt's escape had sent a piece of her own mold flying into Sella's so hard that it cracked it enough to allow Sella to break free.

"Thank you for freeing us, Shirou," Sella said calmly, "We will handle the battle from here."

Shirou tried to bury his amazement at Leysritt's skills, and realized that Sella was using Magecraft to augment her fellow maid's reflexes. However, there was something in Sella's tone that he did not like.

"I'm sorry, but I can't just sit back," Shirou replied, turning to face the robot. It looked it was trying to swat a very persistent gnat. "There's one more thing I have to do..."

"What is it?" Sella asked. Like before, it was an empty, flat voice she said it in.

"I was able to trace Spike- the robot," Shirou added at Sella's raised eyebrow, "A piece of armor on the waist is exposed. If we can deliver a powerful enough impact, the circuits will break completely and Spike will self-destruct."

Gathering his Prana, Shirou tried to Project a bow. "Tried" being the important word. Due to his lack of Mana, what appeared could only be called a bow in the academic sense; It was basically a stick that had a string tied from one end to the other. Shirou didn't have to look to see Sella's deadpan expression.

"As I have said, leave this to us." Sella said, turning away.

Shirou fell to his knees. Exhaustion had caught up to him. *No...no, I can't just sit here with the battle still going on! There has to be more I can do...*

For a brief moment, Shirou found himself back at the Fire. Helpless as people around him screamed and begged for help. But then, a cool, blue, breeze drifted through the heat.

"... you've got a real problem with working other people, don't ya?" Sonic's words whispered through his mind.

No, it's not that... Shirou told himself, *I just...don't deserve help...*

But while Shirou's soul urged him forward, his mind told him to stay. He had weakened Spike enough so that the maid's formidable abilities could finish the job. He had exhausted almost all of his Prana. Right now, just jumping in would only get himself killed, and distract the maids. He knew that. But still, he felt...

Klnk

A clanking noise brought him out of his internal struggle. A Badnik, a Grounder, was approaching Sella from behind. The maid was focusing on casting support Magecraft to aid Leysritt, and hadn't noticed the robot sneaking up on her.

Shirou's body became a motion incarnate. Without thought, without plan, acting on pure instinct, he rushed the Grounder. As he slammed into the digging robot, Shirou realized just how painful hitting metal without Reinforcement was. Nonetheless, he had just enough momentum to tip the robot over, trapping it on its side. Having heard the crash, Sella turned her head to see Shirou pinning the Grounder down. She nodded at Shirou, and then turned her focus back to the battle between Leysritt and Spike. Having overheard Shirou's words, the maid was deftly dodging the robot's strikes, looking for an opportunity to strike hard enough to trigger the self-destruct. As she leapt over one of Spike's arms, she heard a rushing noise in the wind. Holding out her hand, Leysritt caught the

halberd flying through the air. For a normal human, the Riesenarn would be impossible to wield- it's density was three times that of iron. But Leysritt was a homunculous, and made with endurance and strength on par with a Servant, and could swing it around easily. As she did, she saw small, luminescent birds fly around Spike's legs, entangling the limbs with wire constructs. In doing so, they restricted Spike's movements.

There. As Spike bent over to deal with the wires, Leysritt saw it. A small chink in the robot's armor, as Shirou said. It wasn't at a size that a normal human could see with their eyes. Shirou had made good use of his Structural Analysis. Perhaps the young mistress' fascination wasn't completely unwarranted.

Like a bullet, Leysritt shot towards Spike, Riesenarn prepared for the blow.

But Spike had been designed to fight Sonic the Hedgehog, the Fastest Thing Alive. It saw Leysritt coming, disregarded the wires, and lashed out with his claw. Leysritt ended up running right into Spike's grip. The Riesenard fell from her grasp...

...And into Shirou's. He saw what was going to happen to Leysritt and had already rushed to help, despite the burning sensation in his nerves.

Trace...On! Scrounging the very last of his Prana, Shirou became one with the halberd in his grasp. He knew everything about it, how it was forged, what it was made of...and how Leysritt wielded it. However, he didn't have the strength to *use* it. He couldn't Reinforce his arm and Trace the Riesenard. Shirou saw Spike reach out with his other claw...

And then, Shirou felt a rush of energy. Looking back, he saw Sella's hand reached out towards him, Mage Circuits on her body glowing, wires extending from her fingers and onto his own joints. With new confidence, Shirou Reinforced his arm and threw the Riesenard as hard as he could at Spike.

Shirou's aim had never failed him before, and now was no different. Riesenard struck Spike's uncovered part dead-on, and the effects were immediate. Sparks began to fly, and the entire machine began to groan and shudder. Leysritt pulled herself out of Spike's grip, dropped down, and pulled Shirou away from the robot. They reached the minimum safe distance when Spike exploded. The sound of the explosion was like a signal; Whatever Badniks were remaining in the Castle quickly evacuated. Shirou could dots shaped like crabs, bees, and iguanas fleeing in scattered droves.

With the battle over, the adrenalin rush keeping Shirou going stopped. The young mage fell down, finally allowing his body to heal.

"Heey! Shiroooooou!"

Shirou looked up and saw Tails and Rin, flying and running from the Castle, respectively. In Tails' arms was the box, signifying that the Chaos Emerald was safe. He breathed a sigh of relief, and then gave a start. The sound of monstrous footsteps called Shirou's attention. Off to the side, he saw Berserker lumbering their way. He had something under his arms.

But where was Illya? Shirou began to worry, but then he saw a the tiny figure step out from behind Berserker's giant thigh.

"Are you all right, *Onii-chan* ?" Illya called out. Under her arms was a book, but from the distance, Shirou couldn't make out the title. Before he could try to Reinforce his eyes (The cover looked familiar) he heard a whoosh and saw Sonic standing next to him.

"Nice job." Sonic said, patting Shirou on the back.

The group gathered together, and the maids went to check on Illya. As Illya berated Sella and Leysritt for being captured so easily, Berserker set his load down. It turned out to be another Egg Pod.

"Where did *that* come from?" Rin asked as she checked Shirou's body over.

"Berserker and I found this in the basement," Illya explained, hiding the book behind her back. "I wonder what it's for?"

"Eggman probably figured he could snag some critters while he was here," Sonic said, "Just hit the button on top!"

Illya pressed her fingertip to her mouth quizzically. "Really?"

With a wave of her hand, Illya beckoned Leysritt to her. As the maid picked her up from underneath the child's arms, the book Illya had fell to the ground. Sonic snatched it up at the speed of sound. While Illya was thrown bodily onto the Egg Pod's switch, the Hedgehog zipped over to Shirou and presented the book to him.

It was titled "Kiritsugu".

The photo album! Shirou thought, confused. *Why does Illya have it...?*

Cautiously, he opened it up to a random page. The picture he saw was that of Kiritsugu and Shirou, taken several years ago, at a festival taking place near the Ryuudou Temple.

But now a cut-out picture of Illya had been pasted in. It was inexpertly done, and it was pretty obvious that Illya wasn't supposed to be there. A quick flip through the book revealed that most of the other pictures had similar alterations.

A sharp gasp was heard.

Shirou looked up, and saw that the entire group was standing around him in a circle, watching him. And as one, they all turned to Illyaseviel von Einzbern.

Illya stepped forward, her eyes no longer those of a Master. She looked more like a sad little girl than anything.

" *Onii-chan...* "

To be continued

Tiger Dojo

Taiga: Like the phoenix, I, Fujimura Taiga, have risen from the ashes to present the Tiger Dojo!

Illya: The Number Student Illya is here as well! I can't believe that jerk Eggman, he destroyed my castle!

Taiga: Indeed, and now it seems that he is gunning for the Holy Grail itself! But for now, we must answer the questions! X the Reaper asks, "Since Metal Sonic will show up, does that mean he'll use his copy ability on Shirou or Rin to copy their Magecraft and use it against them?"

Illya: It's impossible for a machine to use Magecraft! Maybe it could look it could with those Chaos Emeralds, but even the work of weak Mages like *Onii-chan* or Rin would be beyond a normal robot's tools.

Taiga: Besides, that's assuming Metal would even be allowed to witness Magecraft. After the last time it grew too powerful, Eggman wouldn't let Metal out until it was absolutely necessary.

Illya: "What's the different in Light Gaia and Dark Gaia to Fate Gaia?" from, YCG. I imagine that unlike the Gaia of Sonic's world, the Gaia of Fate is a single entity. However, while Light Gaia and Dark Gaia are in a symbiotic cycle of creation and destruction, the Fate Gaia is simply dedicated to preserving itself, while viewing the evolution of human civilization as a threat to its existence. In short, the Gaia of the Type-Moon universe has no Dark counterpart, as that role is being fulfilled by humanity.

Taiga: Our final question comes from Lunatic-Over9000Lord; "How did they give her a new arm?" I guess you are talking about Bazett!

Illya: When the Chaos Emeralds brought Sonic and co. to Fuyuki, Bazett was bleeding to death as a result of being attacked and

dismembered by Kotomine. In desperation, she tried to close the wound with a rune, but had lost too much blood and fainted. When the Chaos Control dropped the Sonic gang into Fuyuki, the Emeralds' energy reacted to Bazett's subconscious desire to live and the rune pulled her arm back on. Such a thing would be impossible to accomplish when awake, as the mind creates blocks to keep the body from destroying itself, but Bazett was on the verge of death and had nothing to lose, really.

Taiga: That is all we can cover for today's lesson! I will see you at the next practice!

A Ghost's Pumpkin Soup

Chapter 15: A Ghost's Pumpkin Soup

As he stalked the streets of Fuyuki, Shinji felt...hollow. Empty. And still dirty. No matter how many times he washed himself, even going far as to nearly draw blood when he scrubbed too hard, the sheer sense of disgust would not leave. He recalled the story of *Oedipus* and understood what the title character had gone through when he learned the true identity of his wife. And in Shinji's case, it was given the added "bonus" of several hundred vile worms... If he had even an *inkling* of what went on in those underground chambers, he would *never* have...approached Sakura the way he did. At the time, it seemed perfectly natural. After all, he was a healthy young man, she was a beautiful young lady, they weren't *really* related, and she *did* steal his inheritance... the excuses and justifications Shinji told himself every time felt even the slightest guilt for his actions crumbled in the face of what he had gotten into.

And none of them warned me ! Shinji thought, determinedly trying to blame others for his own mistake. At the very least, he now understood why his father hated Magecraft so much, or why that Kariya guy always seemed sick after each "lesson." If Shinji had known, he wouldn't have coveted the Matou Clan's Magecraft so much.

A great hatred welled up as Shinji thought about how everyone in the Matou Clan isolated him from the truth. *Again*. He focused on that rage. It gave him the strength to keep the bile from coming up. Shinji reached into his pocket and pulled out the jump drive Cubort stored the footage of Sakura's...training. At first, he wanted to throw it into a furnace and lock the door, but thought better of it. After all, if *he* didn't want to watch the video file...what would Sakura want?

Shinji's fist closed over the drive. A smile like poisoned honey grew on his face.

Not long after the battle ended, the military showed up. They probably wouldn't have shown up at all, but Shirou convinced Illya to weaken her Boundary Field. There was no chance that Eggman's automated invasion force had gotten into Japan unnoticed. And it would have raised more suspicion if they didn't find any trace of Eggman's actions. Eggman did not cotton to being unnoticed.

The head of the task force dispersed to intercept Eggman was a woman called Topaz. She questioned everyone, even the maids, while soldiers went around, either gathering the remains of the robots or searching the Castle and grounds for Badniks that had been left behind. (Shirou suspected they were looking for something else, but Illya later assured him that anything that could expose Magecraft was safely hidden behind smaller Boundary Fields.)

Answering Com. Topaz ' s questions was a little trickier. Even before the special forces squad arrived, everyone had decided that a proper cover story was needed. Gone were the days where they could just blame unusual events on mundane hazards, such as gas leaks or escaped zoo animals. Rather than lie outright, Tails suggested that they go with the truth- Dr. Eggman attacked, but he had been fended off by his archnemesis, Sonic the Hedgehog. Sonic decided that he would be unavailable to comment, as he and Tails needed to hide the *Tornado* and salvage before the military took everything. They left just enough so the soldiers wouldn't be suspicious. With the resignation that comes from the noose tightening, the Mages agreed.

And now Shirou sat on a stone bench, waiting for the others to be finished. He didn't have to wait long before Illya came out of the government van where one of Topaz ' s lieutenants did the interviews. She didn't look at him, but she walked right up to the bench where he sat. She then sat on his left, laid her head on his lap, and suddenly seemed far older than she looked.

" *Onii-chan* ..." The Einzbern Master murmured he mouth partially muffled by Shirou's thigh.

Shirou felt a twinge. Because now he knew it was true.

Somewhere in the forest was a shack. Next to it was the *Tornado*, covered in cameoflage. And inside the shack were Sonic and Tails. Sonic was lying in the corner trying to see through the ceiling at the sky, while Tails sat on the floor, a portable soldering gun aimed and firing at something that used to be a Buzzbomber's eyes. The hissing noise was the only sound that could be heard.

And then Sonic said, "This universe....is a soap opera."

Tails stopped soldering and gave Sonic a passive look. "I wouldn't go *that* far, but yeah, we've really fallen into some heavy baggage this time," He resumed his work. "So, what should we do about it?"

"Nothin'," Sonic stood up, took a Caterkiller head, and began to juggle it. "Unless it looks like Illya's going to make good on her earlier threats, we stay outta this. Whether or not she and Shirou are long-lost twins, or whatever-"

"Step-siblings, through the dad." Tails put in helpfully.

"-It's not our business," Sonic continued undeterred, "Let's just focus on getting our friends back. Whatcha working on?"

"These?" Tails held up the modified eyes up. "I'm making more Magic Ghost-detecting goggles. They were a huge help when Asassin attacked Rin's place."

Sonic nodded, and smirked. "Good going. Got a pair that go with my eyes?"

Tails laughed. "We'll see. But, y'know..."

"What?"

Tails put his tool and invention down. "Eggman's base is probably out in the sea, and Knuckles is Caster's prisoner."

"too bad we can't have them switch." Sonic cracked.

Tails allowed a smile to flicker, before replacing it with a more thoughtful expression. "Yeah, but... Where's Amy?"

"What do you think, Bazett?" Amy asked.

It was night when she and Bazett arrived at the meeting point they and Rider decided on. It was the top of a office building well after closing time. As the ladies waited for the Servant to show up, Bazett considered Amy's question.

"Are you asking if Rider is trustworthy?" Bazett clarified.

Amy nodded. "Yeah, there's definitely something shifty about her. She's got this 'seductive woman of mystery' motif going on. And what's with that mask? What has she got to hide?"

Bazett understood what Amy was talking about. While there have been Servants who might act outlandish during the War (According to Professor Velvet), Rider did not seem like the kind of person who would open herself up to others. If she was offering to cooperate with them, it was either because she couldn't risk working with the other Master teams, or that she the two of them would be easier to cut ties with.

And there was Rider's claim of knowing about Sonic the Hedgehog. She must have been

But before Bazett could relate this to her friend, there was a rustle of wind. Rider landed down from the air. Amy and Bazett tensed up, but made no other moves.

"Thank you for coming." Rider said.

"What exactly do you need us for?" Bazett asked.

"And do you really know where Sonic is?" Amy added.

Rider smiled faintly. "I know all about your little friend's sleeping arrangements."

Amy's eyes widened, narrowed, and she whipped out her hammer. "You what?! You brazen hussy! You better not have made a move on my Sonic!"

Bazett resisted the urge to palm her forehead. Rider didn't.

"That's not what I meant," Rider sighed. With her enhanced hearing, Amy's shrill accusation sounded three times as bad as it would have normally. "I just know which Master he's staying with."

"So Sonic *is* with a Master," Bazett remarked, "Which one?"

"I'll tell you- *After* we destroy the Shadow." Rider replied.

Amy, now a little calmer, asked, "Do you know where the Shadow is?"

"Yes, but we can't approach it, yet," Rider said, "First, we need to separate it from my Master."

"Well, how do we do that?"

"The Servant Caster has the way," Rider explained, "Her Noble Phantasm can break magical contracts. We can use that to sever the Shadow's bond to my Master."

The eyebrows of Amy and Bazett shot up at the same time. They were both thinking about what other contracts this Noble Phantasm can break. Namely, the kind that bound Lancer to Kotomine.

"If Caster has the power to save your Master from the Shadow, what do you need us for?" Amy asked, "Why not go see her?"

"I may need her for now, but she's still my rival in the War," Rider explained, "I'll need some help when she decides to double-cross me."

Not "If", "When", Bazett noted mentally, and said, "If you're hoping that my Magecraft is sufficient to counter Caster's, then you're giving me too much credit."

"No, I'm not," Rider said, "You're not the one I really need."

"What?"

Rider turned her towards Amy. "If we are to negotiate with Caster, we'll need a way to equal her power. We'll need a Chaos Emerald."

So *that* was it! Rider wanted a Chaos Emerald to bolster her own power when they confronted Caster. And she thought Amy Rose was the key to finding one. While it was true that Amy and her friends knew the most about the Chaos Emeralds, there was just one problem.

Amy clenched her fists, clearly tense. "I don't have a Chaos Emerald. And I don't know where to find one. Tails can a Radar, though. Tell us where Sonic is, and we..."

"That's out of the question," Rider interrupted, "Sonic is working with a Master, and contacting him might endanger my own Master."

While she was aware that Emiya Shirou was the *last* person who would allow Sakura to be hurt, the same couldn't be said about Tohsaka Rin, the Master of Archer. From what she could from her own glimpses into Sakura's past, the Tohsaka heiress was raised to be the standard Mage. She and Emiya had become close due to their alliance in the War, and leading Amy to Sonic *now* would bring Rin into the fold. She would take direct- and terminal -actions on how to deal with the Shadow, at Sakura's expense.

Amy growled, putting her fists on her hips. "Okay, smarty-pants, then how do *you* think we should get an Emerald?"

"From what I've been able while scouting the city, the Emeralds create these Reality Marbles for people to enter, do they not?" Rider asked, "I think I've found one, and I'll need your help navigating it."

Amy looked up at Bazett, who nodded. Amy looked back at Rider and said, "Fine. Show us where it is."

"Follow me." Rider said.

Rider turned and left off of the roof top, and the two mortal girls followed after her. Rider had been initially worried that she would have to stop now and again so they could keep up, she soon realized that they could match her pace. Bazett was a Mage specializing in physical abilities, and Amy Rose was well-versed in chasing after high-speed targets. (Or, more specifically, one target with red sneakers and blue quills). Using flag poles and power lines as stepping stones, the three ladies sped across the city. They had to be careful, however, as Dr. Eggman's repeated assaults on Fuyuki meant there were now cars of armored soldiers stationed at almost every corner, clearly waiting for *something* unusual to shoot at. Whenever there was a risk of someone spotting them, Bazett would use her own Magecraft to hypnotize them into ignoring or forgetting seeing the trio.

Along the way, the girls spotted random Badniks that were wandering around the city, either looking for Chaos Emeralds or more animals to capture. Whenever they did, Amy would insist on destroying the robot. Both Rider and Bazett would have preferred to move on, but had no choice but to acquiesce.

"Every second we spend on these nuisances gives someone else a chance to retrieve the Emerald," Rider muttered after wrecking an Egg-Robo, "Why is she so determined to waste our time?"

But having spent more time with Amy, Bazett was familiar with the Hedgehog's reasons. "Dr. Eggman's robots work by imprisoning animals within the metal shells. By destroying them, we free the trapped animal."

Imprisonment...that was something Rider was all too familiar with. And it was after that that Rider stopped complaining. However, she still wasn't too convinced that the welfare of little critters was worth risking a Chaos Emerald for, and would have left both women behind if she didn't need help navigating the Special Zone.

After a bit of zig-zagging due to military squads and robot patrols, the trio of ladies finally reached their destination. It was an abandoned warehouse, typically used for raves. Amid some discard glitter, plastic cups, and the cockroaches, was the giant gold ring that led to the Special Zone.

"This is it," Rider said, "You two go in and retrieve the Chaos Emerald. I'll remain here and watch the area in case someone comes."

"Not happening," Bazett replied, frowning. "That would make it too easy for you to ambush us if we get the Emerald. You're coming in with us."

"I...can't do that," Rider said hesitantly, "The last time I went in, several of the Shadow's creations were waiting for me. I think the Shadow was planning to steal the Emerald if I was successful."

Which was only part of the reason why Rider was hesitant to re-enter the Special Zone. Things inside the Special Zone were...different. With her heightened senses, Rider had a more in-depth taste of those differences. Sounds came from different directions, wind blew in ways that were not possible, and gravity became less of a rule and more of a polite suggestion. Furthermore, her connection to the Grail and her Master had been disrupted each time she entered. Even a Reality Marble wouldn't have that kind of effect...

"Ughhh, *fine*, " Amy sighed, rubbing her forehead. "Listen, I'll go in by myself, all right? You two just wait out here and keep guard in case Eggman's robots or the Shadow's monsters show up."

Bazett and Rider glared at each other, although it was the glare was only implied in Rider's case. After a moment, they nodded. Sighing in relief, Amy turned and leapt into the Special Zone. As the giant ring vanished, the Bazett turned her gaze towards Rider, whose expression was blank. Her own eyes narrowed.

Unlike the first Special Zone Amy entered in Fuyuki, this one was a lot less colorful. In fact, it was a total void, nothing but white from here to there. The only contrast seemed to be a series of buildings painted in a dull grey. A maze made from solid clouds. As Amy stepped forward, she felt a strange sinking sensation in her gut. She realized that if she didn't find the Chaos Emerald soon, the Special Zone would force her out. Breaking into a run, Amy dashed towards the labyrinth.

The place was both a maze and amazing at the same time. Not only were there the requisite loop-de-loops that seemed to dot her own world, but other effects and pitfalls as well, such as spring pads and pitfalls. Some of the larger gaps had floating platforms acting as stepping stones in the sky to help her get across.

Amy ran into her first obstacle in the form of a spring pad pointed back. She had just come through a loop-de-loop when her momentum carried her right into a wall that had a spring pad attached. The BOING rattled in her ears as Amy was bounced back, and she nearly hit her head on the loop-de-loop ramp.

"Gah!" She used her hammer to steady herself. "I hate those things!"

Resuming her trek and ducking around the spring pad wall, Amy found a dead-end. However, along the walls were more spring pads, each set at an angle. Using them as stepping boards, Amy bounced up the walls, eventually reaching the top. As she stood up, the pink

hedgehog saw a glint in the distance, and knew that it was the Chaos Emerald.

Running forward, Amy felt the floor fall out beneath her and jumped just in time to avoid going into the trap door. While she could feel time running out, Amy knew she couldn't make a rash decision that would cost her the Emerald. Taking out her hammer, Amy used it like a blind man's cane, tapping the floor to feel out more trap doors. While she hurried as fast as she could, Amy was forced to zig-zag as her method found quite a few hidden pitfalls. Soon enough she found herself at a wall. Looking about frantically, she couldn't see any footholds or things to grip onto. Looking down for a hidden spring pad, Amy saw an incline connecting the floor to the wall. Knowing that she didn't have time to really ponder, Amy stepped onto the incline, and found herself going *up* the wall!

This was the home stretch, Amy could feel it. Running faster and faster, Amy found herself being pulled up by something more than her own speed. It was if she was falling, just in the wrong direction. As she ran/fell, Amy could see spring pads popping up on the wall. If she hit one, she would lose time and the Special Zone would collapse before she got the Emerald. Since it was impossible to slow down, Amy tried to steer herself by kicking the wall at an angle, pushing off in directions away from the springs. It wasn't easy, as her momentum seemed to increase with each passing pad. Nonetheless, Amy managed to reach the top...er, bottom...well, she managed to reach the next floor with only a minor headache from trying to figure out which direction she had gone in.

And there it was. The Chaos Emerald, floating atop a pedestal, glowing with a light-blue aura. Taking a deep breath, Amy stepped forward, and then stopped. She looked around suspiciously. So far, she didn't see any monsters akin born of a mutant aquarium. The dark-purple things would stand out in the white environment. Still cautious, Amy reached forward and took the Emerald. She tensed, preparing for some inevitable disaster or attack.

But it never came. The Special Zone vanished.

Several hours before Amy entered the Special Zone, the military had left Einzbern Castle. Commander Topaz offered to transport Shirou, Kin, Illya, and the maids back to Fuyuki, as the Castle was clearly in no condition to live in. Some hypnosis from Illya changed her opinion, and after the various trucks and jeeps were well away from the Boundary Field did the Masters stop holding their breath.

"God, that was terrible," Rin sighed, sitting down on a broken chair. "I thought they would never leave."

Shirou looked up at the Castle, damaged and cracked from the battle. "Maybe we should have accepted Topaz- *san* 's offer. I'm worried that this place will fall apart any moment."

Illya laughed, "Don't worry about it, *Onii-Chan*! With my power, restoring this Castle will be easy, not to mention that Sella and Leysritt are already hard at work with the repairs."

"Besides, Shirou, this is still an ideal place to make our preparations," Rin said, straightening up. "If we go back to Fuyuki now, we won't be able to face Caster."

Shirou nodded. With all the excitement caused by Eggman, he had almost forgotten why they had come to Illya's Castle. "So, I guess you two are still going to help Tails make his...Anti-matter Emerald? What should Sonic and I do?"

"Did someone mention me?" Sonic asked as he ran into the courtyard. He had a sack full of robot parts held by both arms. Next to him was Berserker, who was carrying the *Tornado* over his head. The giant Servant was looking off to the side at Sonic, who was trying to direct Berserker on letting the plane down gently. "Trying" being the key term.

"...Okay, just put it down *slowly* ." Tails said holding out his hands. He mimed the intended action, hoping that would be understood by the brute. " *Slow-ly*. Don't squeeze it! We just got the dents out..."

"The big guy stopped by and told us that the Military was moving out," Sonic explained, "Actually, he didn't really say anything, he just picked up the *Tornado* and took it back here."

Illya nodded. "When Commander Topaz began moving her troops out of my castle, I sent Berserker to fetch you. He's not very eloquent, so the only way he can communicate is by action."

"Maybe next time you should just give him a note," Sonic commented, and looked around. "Man, if I didn't know better, I'd swear this place looked better before the MIBs played housekeeper."

"The military searched the castle for more Badniks," Shirou explained, "I think they may have been a bit excessive."

"'Excessive' is how armies roll," Sonic said, "If they don't spend their budgets, they'd have to take a paycut."

Shirou couldn't help but laugh a little bit. Sonic's logic was an amusing mix of cynicism and biting humor.

"I'm gonna give this place another quick runaround, just to see if there are any more surprises left over," Sonic said, "As soon as night falls, I'll go back to Fuyuki and search for Amy again. Maybe I'll catch her before Caster does."

"Hold it," Rin said, getting up. "If you go running around Fuyuki, Caster might get ahold of you. If that happens, our chances of beating her will go from 'hard' to 'impossible.'"

"Relax, I've got a trump-card," Sonic fished into one of the bags and pulled out some kind of rod. It looked like a pendant. "Tails said this can make me immune to magic, right?"

Rin pursed her lips in thought. "I wouldn't go that far. At the very least, it should heighten your natural resistance to mental assaults."

Illya blinked. "Hmm? What is that?"

Rin smirked. "Oh, just a special talisman I invented using the Power Rings. It's supposed to shield the wearer from offensive Magecraft."

"Is that so?" Illya took the pendant from Sonic's hand and examined it. Curious, she put it around her own neck.

"...Oh, and that protection comes at the cost of inhibiting the wearer's Magecraft aptitude," Rin continued smugly, "As they say, a door swings-"

Rin was cut off by the soft thud of a body hitting the floor. Everyone stared in shock at Illya's prone form. Berserker let out a roar of rage, charged off, and rammed headlong into a nearby wall. The rubble was only halfway to the ground when Sonic pulled the pendant off of Illya. Shirou went over and helped his 'little sister' up, holding her in his arms. He shook her gently, trying to get a reaction.

"Illya? Illya, are you all right?" Shirou asked, concerned. "Illya!?"

Illya stirred, and slowly opened her eyes. " O...Onii-chan? "

Shirou sighed, relief flooding into him. Sonic had walked over to Rin and gave her the pendant, who looked at it in confusion.

"What happened to you?" Rin asked Illya. "When Archer tried it on, all it did was make his body heavy."

"Erm... I don't know..." Illya said, "I began to feel weak, and then..." Her eyes began to sparkle. "You were there, *Onii-chan*..."

Rin felt a vein appear on her forehead. *Why, that little-! She was faking it!*

Shirou would have thought the same, yet his close proximity to Illya meant he could check her heartbeat. It was getting faster, but still rather faint. *Had Illya been feigning her fall...?*

"The point of the pendants are to disrupt the flow of magic power," Tails said, walking over. "Maybe your health was augmented by a

spell. Were you ever real sick once?"

Illya frowned, deep in thought. Then, she pushed herself out of Shirou's arms and stood up.

"It's nothing to worry about," She said, sounding less like a child than she normally did. "We should focus more on preparing for our attack on Caster's workshop."

"But..."

"I said, let's get to work!" Illya shouted, almost desperately.

"O...okay," Tails agreed hesitantly, "Um, I've got some designs for tools we'll need..."

As Tails continued to talk, Rin looked back and forth from the pendant to Illya. There was something more to the little Master, something the Einzbern child didn't want anyone else to know about.

Well, at the very least, we have a way of bringing down Illya when our alliance ends. Rin thought. After all, there was still the rest of the War to think about. Just because Illya agreed to work with them now, it didn't mean she would keep it up after Caster was beaten. Until one of their Servants were dead, they were still enemies, just currently operating under a truce. When the time came, they would betray each other.

She would not abandon the goal of the Tohsaka Clan simply because of a soap opera plot twist. Sister to Shirou or not, Rin would not forget that.

Zouken had experienced a fair share of twists in his life as a mage, but right now the situation with the Shadow was by far the most exasperating. Sakura's session in the worm pit was ultimately pointless. While the Crest Worms *had* attached themselves to Sakura's body, they had become completely consumed by the

Shadow the minute they entered her. In trying to instill a control over Sakura, Zouken had inadvertently gave the Shadow more Prana to absorb!

"Just give it a rest, Grandpa."

Zouken slowly turned around. He had to move slowly, as it his age a sudden movement might snap his brittle frame in two. There, standing against the wall of his study was Avenger, still in the form it had taken during the attack Eggman led on the high school. Zouken cursed whatever cruel fate had deigned to grant the Shadow with the power of the Assassin-class' True Concealment.

"I mean, I let you put on a little show for our audience, but I'm afraid that you're going to put my dear, sweet Master into an early grave," Avenger continued, examining his nails. "So, I think it's time to be shuffling off."

Avenger began to rise, and Zouken realized that his life was now in danger. While he had technically died numerous times over the centuries, that was merely the breaking down of a physical body. Every time his own body failed, his Crest Worms would consume another human, allowing Zouken to resume his life by making their body his own. Unfortunately, the Shadow had been designed to consume Prana itself. He would *literally*

But Zouken had not gotten this far by using his abilities like a crude club. He knew how to negotiate. And how to put on a good poker face.

"I'm afraid you misunderstand my intentions, Avenger," Zouken said, "I am only trying to ensure that the Holy Grail forms without fail."

"And just what do you mean by that?" Avenger asked, raising an eyebrow. He actually rose it too high, making it look like his face was stretching.

"I have noticed that you have been sending your...familiar around to consume the Mana of the townspeople," Zouken said cautiously, knowing he was on thin ice. "This may expedite the process, but your actions are drawing too much attention. If the Mage's Association gets wind of what is happening in this city, they will send their Enforcers to put a stop to everything. You need to be more...subtle...if you are to create the Holy Grail."

Avenger didn't react. His expression was unreadable...because the face had completely faded away. There was only a black surface under the hairline.

But then, a blood-red crescent appeared where the mouth should be. A strange, distorted laugh could be heard.

"Heh heh heh...Is that what you're worried about, Zolgen?" Avenger asked, "And poor, naive me, thinking you were just trying to put the two of us back under your leash!" The normal face returned, and he said, "You really haven't been paying attention, have you? I'm not *feeding* on the humans, I'm *attacking* them. There's a difference."

Now it was Zouken's turn to raise his eyebrow. "You... you're only attacking people? You aren't draining their Mana?"

Avenger chuckled, and held out his hand. A bulge appeared in his armpit, traveled along his arm, and out from his palm was a purple gem. Zouken could feel the power emitting from it like the heat from a giant bonfire. It was all he could do not to drool.

"This little baubel is alllll the power I need," Avenger taunted, fully aware of the Emerald's allure to the old Mage. "Everything else is just a little...sport. Something to keep the others preoccupied while I set up the final stage."

Avenger let the Emerald dangle by a tendril of flesh protruding from his palm. It swung slowly through the air, only a mere foot off of the ground. Despite his best efforts to control himself, Zouken couldn't help but find his eyes drawn to the gem. Its presence called to his

Mage senses like a siren's song. Being around it was like spending your entire life in the cold, and then finding a single bonfire. Or taking a deep breath after nearly drowning. Zouken could have come up with more analogies, but the sheer toxicity of Avenger's presence stifled the Mage's thought processes.

The Shadow pulled the Emerald back into his body. "I think I've established how things are going to go from here," Avenger said, sinking into the floor like a melting snowman. "Just take a nap, old man...the next generation are going to finish what you could never complete."

And just like that, Avenger was gone. But Zouken knew the Shadow was still lurking close by, hiding with Assassin's Presence Concealment. However, he now had other matters to attend to. He *had* to obtain a Chaos Emerald. He didn't care how. If he could only find just one...

And then Zouken's mind caught up with him. "What did he mean by 'audience'?"

Outside the Matou Manor, Avenger looked up at the sky. The wild blue yonder was far too clear for his liking. But he knew that dark clouds would be on the horizon.

Go find another Chaos Emerald for me, Zolgen. Having two at a time would be too much for Sakura to handle, but maybe if the flow of power came from multiple directions...

And far, far away, Sakura clutched her heart.

At the Einzbern Castle, things were picking up. Once they had gotten their instinctive urge to one-up and belittle each other out of their system, Rin and Illya were diligent Mages. With help from Tails, they worked together to create an oppositely-charged Chaos Emerald replica, a process that turned out to be more explosive than they

hoped. While Tails had the mathematical formula ready, it was a method meant for a technological apparatus than a Magecraft ceremony. The energies of the Chaos Emerald were difficult to master, and while both girls managed to avoid hurting themselves (again, in Rin's case), trying to reverse and contain the power put a few more craters in the Einzbern's land.

While Tails, Illya, and Rin tried to find a way to invert the energy of the Chaos Emerald, Shirou and the maids were hard at work with construction. With the left over robot parts and designs loaned by Tails, the three of them built tools and weapons that would be needed for their assault on Salem. Shirou was currently helping with some sort of energy cannon that was supposed to be fitted around the arm. While Sella and Leysritt refined the scrap and circuitry into parts, Shirou assembled everything together. It was a different experience, building something new. Before, Shirou had only repaired things. It was just a matter of making sure the fixed product was identical to how they were scanned with Structural Analysis. Creating, on the other hand, meant he had no scanned image to complete. It was like walking in the dark, where each step only created a small light. It was almost exhilarating, entering new territory.

"You're really enjoying yourself playing with that, aren't you, Emiya-kun? "

Shirou looked up and saw Rin walking up to him. His classmate looked tired, and her hair, although still tied in pigtails, was frazzled. She was accompanied by Illya, who's appearance also held a similar effect. Upon seeing Illya, both of the maids ceased their two-man assembly and stood at attention.

"We're taking a break before trying to make the Fake Emerald again," Illya declared, and ordered her maids, "Please prepare some snacks."

"Yes, Lady Illya," Both ladies replied, and left the room.

"They've been working hard themselves," Shirou pointed out, "Shouldn't they have a break as well?"

Illya shrugged, and sat down on a pillow. She gestured for Shirou to do likewise on an adjacent pillow. "Don't worry, Sella and Leysritt have more than enough energy to do their regular chores *and* make...whatever it is you have."

"It's an energy cannon," Shirou explained, looking at the incomplete weapon. "According to Tails, it's supposed to shoot balls of condensed kinetic force at the target."

Rin harrumphed, and sat down on the pillow Illya had been saving for Shirou. Illya gave Rin a glare that could have melted stone, but the high school girl just ignored her.

"Only a Mage of your caliber would get excited playing around with a piece of metal." Rin said shortly.

Shirou looked at his fellow ex-Master. "Actually, that's something I wanted to ask you about. You said seemed pretty upset when I first started helping with the *Tornado*. What's wrong with a Mage using advanced technology?"

"Emiya -*kun* , didn't your father tell you *anything* about proper Magecraft values?" Rin asked, exasperated.

"No," Shirou replied simply, "All he taught me was a few spells. That's all."

Rin sighed, and said, "A true Mage is supposed to be beyond normal technology. Our goal is to seek and understand the arcane power that flows through the world and ourselves. Whatever convenience modern machinery has will never surpass the tools our Magecraft has already made," She drew herself up proudly, "Among the Tohsaka Clan's possessions is a special apparatus that allows flawless communication between two points, all without electricity and regardless of distance!"

To Shirou, that sounded remarkably useful. However, he had one concern. "What if you want to call someone else?"

Rin frowned, making a noise like rocks being put through a blender. She looked away, clearly unable to come up with an answer.

"I'm not saying a Mage's tools are inferior," Shirou went on, "But I think we shouldn't disregard mechanical devices out of hand if they can help us even the odds."

As they were talking, Shirou fitted the last component onto the cannon. Fitting the device around his arm, Shirou took aim. The barrel began to glow, and a burst of light shot out, striking a piece of wall with a loud bang.

"Wow..." Shirou murmured, and looked back at his new weapon in wonder.

Behind him, Rin and Illya's eyes widened. While they had seen Eggman's weapons in action, seeing a similar device wielded by one of their own was...unsettling. The eager expression in his eyes did nothing to alluviate their unease.

"Just like Papa..." Illya sighed, lying back. "He preferred to use weapons instead of Magecraft, too."

Rin glanced at Illy. This was the first she had mentioned Kiritsugu since the confrontation over the photo album. She wondered what kind of Mage the Einzberns would trust with winning the Holy Grail's wish in their name. She found it a bit incredulous that someone involved with such an ancient line would be so...unorthodox.

Illya looked up wistfully. "They even summoned the very same Servant..."

Shirou looked at Illya suddenly. The buster cannon slowly slid off of his arm. Around the corner, Sella and Leysritt wheeled in a cart of

various snacks and drinks. Under the cart, Tails had a cookie in his mouth as his tails flicked casually.

Sonic was right...this place is a soap opera!

Sonic raced through the streets of Fuyuki, stopping only when it seemed like a military patrol might spot him. There were more and more armed squads in every section of the city. Sonic privately hoped that Eggman's presence wouldn't provoke the creation of a parallel to G.U.N in this universe. It was bad enough Shirou and Rin had to worry about a bad bunch like the Mages Association.

Unless the Association is the local G.U.N... Sonic thought as he held out his arm.

The Blue Blur's caught hold of a street lamp pole, and after five spins at the corner, shot off down the right. Sonic checked his GPS and took another left after a bit. It wasn't long before he arrived at the bridge where he first met Shirou, Rin, and Saber.

Hope Saber's doing okay. From what Shirou told me, she was able to resist a little when Caster tried using the Command Seals...maybe she can hold out until we rescue her.

Sonic raced up one of the bridge's suspension suspenders. Once he was at the top, Sonic took stock of his surroundings. His GPS had a map of Fuyuki, and he could have easily just checked it, but Sonic liked getting a lay of the land with his own eyes. Squinting, he looked in the direction of the Ryuudou Temple. For a moment, he could have sworn he saw a faint glowing light surrounding it. Shaking his head, Sonic turned his attention towards his intended direction; Fuyuki Church. Although it was faint, he couldn't see anything dangerous between him and the Church.

With a nod, Sonic began to roll down the bridge, and used the momentum to flung himself onto the rooftops. Landing on his feet, Sonic began to run, jumping from one building to another. As he

moved, Sonic heard the faint sound of small turbines and narrowly darted aside. The spot he had been running in exploded shot by an unseen gun. Sonic looked up and saw a small Buzzbomber flying after him. With a roll of his eyes, Sonic spun on his heels and destroyed the Badniks with a Homing Shot. As a pigeon flew away, Sonic resumed his journey.

It was funny that there were Eggman's robots still crawling around the city. You'd think the military would be focused on destroying any Badniks they could find. Sonic saw a Crabmeat carrying what looked like a stray cat in one of its pincers down at the street level. Hopping down, Sonic smashed the robot crustacean and then used a traffic light as a way to return to the rooftops. As much fun it had been to zip between alleys, life in the city tended to be a bit too *constricting* for his liking. While Sonic had no problem bouncing off of walls and other structures, and sometimes went out of his way to do it, some people always got annoyed when he was careening around a metropolis. On the roofs, at least, he had the open sky to feel free in.

Sonic ducked as a spiked ball flew at his head. An Orbinaut! There were still three more balls flying his way, but Sonic easily maneuvered around them and turned the smooth metal sphere into jagged scrap. A raccoon critter scampered free.

Sonic kept encountering Badniks as he sped across the city, but they didn't slow him down. In short order he arrived at the Fuyuki Church. Sonic a slight ripple across his fur that told him he had entered the Boundary Field, and braced himself. He expected that Kotomine would show up for a fight.

What he *didn't* expect was a smoldering shell of building. Windows had been shattered. Gashes had been made in the grounds around the building. In the cemetery behind, several tombstones and grave markers had been knocked over, smashed, with bits of skeletons hanging over the place.

Sonic went inside the building to find the interior was of a similar condition. The pews had been completely demolished, the various

ornaments were knocked over, and only the podium where the Bible was laying on remained undisturbed.

What happened here? Sonic thought. Cupping his hands over his mouth, he called out, "Sanctuary!"

At first, nothing, then *something*.

The floor beneath Sonic lit up as letters from a bygone era appeared in a circle around him. Sonic zipped out of the circle just in time to avoid a great, skeletal hand bursting from the ground. The hand was followed by the rest of the skeleton, a massive collection of bones that as roughly the size and girth of Berserker, minus the chiseled flesh. In the eye sockets, purple fire burned.

Sonic instantly recognized what was happening. *Looks like Caster was here before me!*

Chaos Magecraft Familiar: "Dragon Tooth King"

The Dragon Tooth King lunged at Sonic, sweeping its claw-like hand across the room. Sonic hopped over the attack, and began to run up its boney arm. He launched a Homing Shot that rattled the skull, but apparently did no damage. Landing on the floor, Sonic zipped around as the Dragon Tooth King tried to retaliate by slamming both fists on the ground. While the impact caused a sizable tremor, Sonic easily avoided it by jumping at just the right moment and launched *another* Homing Shot! Apparently angry at missing, (it was hard to tell what a creature without a face was thinking), the Dragon Tooth King began to spin around, becoming a whirling tornado of bones and evil. The force of the Dragon Tooth King's rotation began to pull everything *including Sonic!* The Hedgehog immediately turned and began to run as fast as he could from the Dragon Tooth King's spinning. He had to duck and weave around debris being sucked in. Soon the Dragon Tooth King stopped spinning, and Sonic nearly ran head-on into one of the knocked-over pews. Curving around to avoid a collision, Sonic used his redirected momentum to slam himself into the Dragon Tooth King's side. The huge skeleton stumbled for a bit, then straightened

and glared at Sonic. Sonic could tell it was glaring because the fire in its eye sockets had turned from purple to red.

"Hey, come on, now, don't be like that," Sonic said holding his hands defensively, "You attacked me first!"

Sonic ducked to the side to avoid a pair of giant boney fists coming down on his head. The Dragon Tooth King grabbed the pews and began to throw them at Sonic haphazardly. Sonic raced around the room to avoid being struck, as each thrown pew once the Dragon Tooth King ran out of the ammunition, he began to spin around again. Rather than run away like he did before, Sonic ran to the skeleton before its revolution speed became unbearable. Leaping up towards the neck, Sonic grabbed the Dragon Tooth King's head and used his momentum to spin it around in the opposite direction. This caused the skull to unscrew and it actually flew off and crashed onto the floor! The rest of the Dragon Tooth King lost its balance and fell down with a clatter. Sonic landed a few feet away, ready for whatever trick was next. Because a magical skeleton didn't just fall to pieces and not do anything to retaliate.

He didn't have long to wait. The skull floated up into the air, and bones from the remaining skeleton began to orbit around it, like an atom made of calcium and evil. The skull flew at Sonic, sending its orbiting bones out in offense. Sonic slide under the bones and then rolled to the side to avoid a femur that had been shot at him. More bones began to fly at him, so Sonic raced around the room to avoid being struck. Once enough bones had been thrown, Sonic landed several Homing Shot on the less-protected skull. Once he finished, the skull began to fumble throughout the air...before reassembling it's entire skeleton. A skeleton that once more began to throw pews at Sonic.

This thing is never going to stay down! Sonic thought as he dodged wood, *There's gotta be something else I can do!*

Sonic absent-mindedly reached into his left glove with his other hand and tugged at the Ring Pendent Rin made. He had stuffed into his

glove because it felt on dangling around his neck as he ran. An idea then came to him. As the Dragon Tooth King lunged, Sonic zipped around its arms shot at its ribcage. Taking out the pendant out of his glove, Sonic jammed the artifact into the animated spine. Leaping away, the Hedgehog waited for a reaction.

Tails said the charm should disrupt magical energy, He thought, Hope it works on dem dry bones here!

However, the Dragon Tooth King didn't seem to feel any harsh effects from having the pendant jammed into its spine. It lashed out at Sonic, swinging its phlanges around in an arc. Sonic jumped up to avoid the strike, and slammed down onto the forearm. There was a horrible snapping sound as the bone broke in two. There was a pregnant pause as both Sonic and the Dragon Tooth King stared at the fractured limb, both expecting the pieces to reassemble. They didn't. Sonic felt a grin begin to form, and turned his eager expression at the Dragon Tooth King.

And it was clear that the skeleton didn't share Sonic new enthusiasm. It began to spin violently again, only this time the whirling tornado of bones began to move around the church! Sonic found himself being pulled left and right as he struggled to run away from the Dragon Tooth King's fierce revolutions. Inspiration struck and Sonic stopped running and curled into a Spin Dash. As he built up his own speed, Sonic's curled up form was slowly pulled towards the Dragon Tooth King. Before he could get too close to the cyclone of bones, Sonic released the Spin Dash. The speed enhancement from both the tornado and the Spin Dash shot Sonic directly past the Dragon Tooth King's spinning form and at the wall. Running up towards the ceiling, Sonic pushed off and leapt back. Having reached a height further than the spinning Dragon Tooth King, Sonic was directly above the skeleton...and then slammed down onto it! The impact shattered the Dragon Tooth King instantly. The bones that weren't scattered by Sonic's attack began to writhe, as if made of living rubber. But, they too began to decay and turn to ash. The creature dissolved, becoming the nothing it sprang from.

Sonic stayed tense, ready for anything. When nothing happened, he let himself relax. Going over to where the Dragon Tooth King had been, he retrieved his pendent. Seeing an open door (Well, it was technically open. A more accurate description would be "Barely hanging by its hinges), Sonic went to check it out. The Church's inner sanctum had more hidden rooms than he reckoned with. Most were empty and unlocked, built from stone. They looked far older than the main church above. The overall effect of the underground sections reminded Sonic of a *Castlevania* game he once played. There was even a wine cellar, but the casks had been empty for years, apparently.

"Hello?" Sonic called out, "Kirie Kotomine? Yo, Mr. Preacher!" No response. Sonic rubbed his the bottom of his nose in thought. *Hmm, no answer, but no trace. Did Caster take him prisoner, or...*

Caster moaned softly. With her head lying in his lap, Souichiru gently stroked the witch's forehead. Although his expression was without emotion, his touch was gentle. However, there was a bead of sweat running down his face. Caster tapping into the Chaos Emerald's power enhanced her Magecraft considerably, but using so much of it proved to be incredibly taxing. So much that he had felt a bit of the pressure and heat himself through their connection as Master and Servant. After transforming her lair underneath the Shrine and then attacking the church, the Witch of Betrayal had hit her limit. All she could do was rest and recover through the Ryuudou mountain leylines.

Souichiru wished he could do more to help Caster. After he had left the organization, his life had been completely empty. It was only after finding Caster- A Servant who had killed her original Master -on the verge of death making a contract that he began to feel a sense of meaning in his existence. And he would see it through to the end.

Kuzuki looked up. While he could neither hear, see, smell, or even feel a disturbance in the flow of air, some sixth sense, born from his

training as an assassin, told him he wasn't alone anymore. And he knew exactly who it was.

"Go back to your patrol, Archer." The school teacher said firmly.

In his astral form, the bowman shuddered, turned around, and left the chamber. Back in his own time period, Kuzuki Souichiru had always been intimidating, but that moment was truly unnerving. And he needed his nerves to be calm as ever if he was to go forward.

Archer began to march around Caster's lair, preparing himself mentally for the battle to come. Tomorrow night she would invoke the ritual that would create the Holy Grail from the Chaos Emerald and Saber. And that was also when Sonic and Shirou's group would attack, to retake Saber and the Emerald. It would be a battle to remember. Unfortunately, it would be a losing one. Unless someone broke the rules...

I am the bone of my sword.

The minute Amy jumped into the Special Zone, the tension in the air—already at the viscosity of pea soup—developed a thickness akin to wet cement in the July sun. Bazett and Rider did their best to keep each other in their sights without actually looking, an act Rider, thanks to her blindfold, excelled at. The world of professional Magecraft was rife with treachery, where alliances were made and broken depending on the flow of power, both actual and political. With Amy's presence came a reminder that life was not all double-crosses and feigned alliances. She embodied a purer, more wholesome way of life. And her absence was akin to dosing a lantern in a dark cellar.

And so the two women stood in stoic silence, both on-guard for an outside attack or internal strife turned deadly. Luckily, they didn't have to wait long. Amy reappeared in a flash of light, holding the Chaos Emerald.

"That was a *weird* Special Zone," She declared, and held up her prize. "But nothing this cute Hedgehog couldn't handle!"

Even with her blind fold on, Rider could see the Chaos Emerald 's brilliant light. The raw, untapped energy wasn't a mere candle in the darkness, but a strobe light piercing through the fog. And from she could sense was happening at Caster's lair in the Ryuudou Temple, the gem in Amy's hand was just the beginning. Channeling its power without harming Sakura would be tricky. However, she need to do so in order to gain Caster's help without risk of betrayal.

"Now that we have the Emerald, we should- *Amy get away!* " Bazett yelled in alarm. A shadowy form was appearing behind the pink Hedgehog.

Amy began to move, but Rider was already in action. She threw one of her chains at the newcomer, impaling it instantly with the spiked end. Rather than exploding like wanted, the Shadow just *melted* out of the weapon and onto the floor. It shot over to Amy and reformed, taking both the Emerald and the form of Avenger.

"Thank you very much, ladies," Avenger chortled, "I was *wondering* when another one of these world turn up."

That was as far as Avenger got when the head of a very large mallet collided into his. The Chaos Emerald fell from his grip and Bazett scooped it up instantly. She used her momentum to deliver a rune-powered kick into Avenger's chest, sending the Shadow flying into a wall.

"You're not getting *this* Emerald without a fight!" Amy declared, holding her hammer out like a sword.

Where did she pull that from? Rider thought as she rushed at Avenger. She gripped her Nameless Dagger and thrust it at the Shadow, intending to stab his heart...or where his heart should be. However, before she could connect, Avenger swept his arm at her

leg, and *something* burst out of his hand. Rider felt a sudden pain in her thigh and leapt away.

"Is...is that coming out of his *hand*? " Amy asked, gaping.

There was indeed something coming out of Avenger's palm; The head of a spear. Avenger waved it around, a deranged smile on his face. Rider frowned, and focused some of her Prana to regenerate her leg. There was plenty of Mana to absorb, from her connection to Sakura and the "background radiation" of the Chaos Emerald.

Avenger held up his hand and tapped the tip of the spear coming from the palm with his finger. "I remember this. Can't believe Lancer destroyed it himself..."

That made Bazett freeze. Lancer destroyed his own spear? But that was impossible! No Lancer, in fact, no Heroic Spirit would intentionally break their own Noble Phantasm. Unless compelled to do so by their Master. Did Kotomine force Lancer to weaken himself?

As Bazett tried to figure this out, a small figure leapt from the shadows. It was one of Avenger's twisted mutant summons! The creature, which looked more like a slug with an eye sticking out of its back, jumped at the Mage and snatched the Chaos Emerald from her hand. Then, as its single eye began to glow, the slug-thing raced out of the building, going far faster than a gastropod had right to.

"No!" Amy shrieked, "Come *back*, you slimy sneak! That's our ticket home!"

Amy took off after the demon-slug, with Bazett right behind. Rider was tempted to follow them both, but she knew she had to deal with Avenger. The corrupting Servant leered at her nastily, his entire body becoming like the shadow he posed as. Only his eyes remained as a red aura enveloped his form.

Looks like I'll have to just trust those two to get by on their own, Rider thought as she prepared herself. She suddenly felt a sharp

pain through her leg...the same leg that Avenger stabbed before.
Wh-what...!? I thought I healed this! What's going on?!

Seeing Rider's shock and discomfort made Avenger chuckle. It sounded like it came from the bottom of the sea. There was also a squelching sound as the spear was pulled further from his hand.

"Oh yes," Avenger sneered, "Can't believe ol' Diarmuid would do it..."

Avenger took hold of the spear, and broke the head off of the handle that was growing from his palm. He twirled it a bit, intending to use the weapon as a dagger. Rider instantly threw her actual dagger at Avenger, aiming for his head. Avenger melted back into a puddle, ducking under the weapon. The puddle slithered over to Rider and reformed into Avenger, who attacked. Rider used the chain of her weapon to block the attack, then wrapped it around the spear and pulled, hoping to disarm her enemy. Instead, Avenger's arm just stretched like silly-putty! Rider sensed Avenger's hand beginning to dissolve and melt around her own fingers, and quickly released him to get the gunk off. Splattering on the ground, the bits returned to Avenger.

"You know, I've been thinking," Avenger murmured, "All of this otherworldly energy is giving the Master a headache. Maybe she'll get better with a little local flavor."

I can't take him...it...lightly anymore... Rider realized, and reached for her blindfold. Hopefully the Mystic Eyes of Death would help win the battle. But just as she undid the blind, Avenger vanished from the area. *Wha-? Where did he go!?*

Rider looked about furiously, extending her senses to their utmost in hopes of catching her quarry. Had it been teleportation? He had come onto the scene unnoticed just as quickly...

Rider suddenly felt Avenger's presence behind. Whirling about (Sending making her leg hurt again), she slashed at Avenger, causing his body to splatter like a being made of liquid. However, her

leg's condition meant Rider couldn't move properly, and so her spin sent her tumbling away as Avenger reformed. As she righted herself (Ow, ow, this leg, that spear) Rider shot a glare at Avenger, only to find that he had vanished again.

This...this fight's going to go back and forth until one of us slips up. I'm a better fighter, but Avenger seems to gain new abilities the longer he lives. I'll need to bring out that ...forgive me, Sakura.

Rider stabbed herself, and blood began to pour out of her body. The drops of blood, instead of falling to the ground, swirled into the air, forming a Magecraft circle. Using the blood as a nexus, she called forth a beast from the Age of the Gods. As a member of the Rider-class, taming it would be simple. But that alone wouldn't be enough to crush Avenger.

" *Bellerophon!* "

Outside, Amy and Bazett were involved in probably the most frantic game of cat and mouse ever. One would think that catching the demon-slug that stole the Chaos Emerald would be a simple matter, but there were several complications. The slime trail it left as it slithered all around the pavement was heated, to the point where it could probably fry an egg. This meant that the two ladies had to be very careful while chasing after the slug. Furthermore, the slug seemed to be attracting more demonic monsters around, and whenever one met the other, they merged, becoming bigger, more violent, less willing to just retreat.

"No, no, no!" Amy yelled, bringing her hammer down on another starfish that wandered onto the battlefield. "Stay away, you little freaks!"

Bazett, meanwhile, dove once more at the slug, only to miss and burn herself on the trail it left. Hissing curses of pain under her breath, the Enforcer flipped back up just in time for another miniature demon to merge with the slug. The abominable thing was now half of

her own size. It then began to spin around like a tornado made from pulsing flesh. It whirled towards Amy, who darted to the side to avoid it. Jumping into the air, the pink Hedgehog slammed her hammer onto the top of the creature, only to be rebuffed by the rotations. However, when the slug began to slow to a stop, she threw herself at the beast and whacked it with the force of a hockey player's slap shot. The creature went flying...right in the direction of yet *another* starfish, that was consumed instantly. The thing was now equal to Bazett in height.

"Darn it!" Amy cried, slapping her forehead in frustration.

With a weary sigh, Bazett activated her runes and charged at the creature. Thankfully, every time it grew, the thing seemed to lose its maneuverability. And now it was a bigger target. Sweeping her leg out, she landed a powerful kick, enhanced by her runes, and struck the thing right where it's stomach should be. Or more specifically, the glowing spot on it's *faux* -stomach. The force of Bazett's blow caused the creature's opposite to explode open...and a certain glowing jewel to tumble out from the hole.

"I got it!" Amy yelled, diving at the Chaos Emerald. She held it up in victory! "Success!"

The warehouse exploded. A brilliant light shot into the sky. Amy and Bazett gaze upward at the figure soaring from the air.

"Is...is that a *pegasus*?! " Amy gasped, clutching the Emerald in shock.

And riding the pegasus, holding a set of reins that looked like they were forged by the Gods themselves, was Rider herself. With her blindfold off, displaying her piercing gaze for all to see, she looked every bit like one of the Four Horsemen.

Bazett was just as amazed as Amy was, but for a different reason. While the pegasus was a fantastic beast, to be sure, she knew that no ordinary Servant could bring forth such a creature. And only a

Servant from the Age of the Gods would have the strength of will to put the beast under her control.

Rider tugged at the reins, and her steed dove down at the warehouse. The flying horse was like a shooting star, moving at speeds on par with Sonic. Rider knew that maybe, just maybe, she was overdoing it. The fantastic beast wasn't something to be thrown at a single enemy. On it's own, it was just a docile animal. But when its spirit was egged on by the bridle, it had the kind of power that could decimate armies. But Avenger wasn't an ordinary opponent. With her own agility hindered by the Shadow's curse, she would have to settle for overwhelming strength.

The pegasus colided with the warehouse, and tore through the building as if it was made of paper. Rider directed her steed back into the air and surveyed the damage. She knew that Avenger could probaly use its Assassin-like powers to escape. But he wouldn't. The Shadow was, at its core, hungry. Hungry for Prana. It had expressed an interest in consuming life force native to this world. The jewels from Sonic's world were potent, but also damaging. They were like steroids. In order to maintain a health existence, the Shadow would need to devour energy native to its world of origin. Avenger would never let the chance at the pegasus slip from his fingers. She dove the pegasus down again, this time obliterating the merged demon completely.

"Holy cow!" Amy gasped, "They don't do *that* on *My Little Pony!* "

"Something's wrong," Bazett cried, grabbing Amy by the arm.
"Rider's totally lost control!"

It would certainly appear so. Rider swooped her pegasus around the area, destroying much of the scenery whenever she caught a glimpse of a dark shape wriggling. Whatever plan she had concocted was gone- only a desire to destroy the enemy that appeared before her.

The pegasus dove down at the area again, like a self-aware comet. This time they made a fissure in the street as the flying horse swooped upward. Debris and litter were tossed about

" *Rider!* " Amy yelled at the top of her lungs, " *Calm! Down!* "

But Rider didn't hear her. All she heard was a storm of pain, anguish, and sin brewing within her mind. She shot her gaze everywhere, hoping to catch sight of her prey. Amy tossed the Emerald to Bazett and ran out into the open, waving her arms in a hopeless bid to get her attention. Briefly, the Hedgehog's eyes met the Servant's- and so the pink one did freeze solid, becoming like stone.

"Arg-!" Amy's cries were silenced instantly.

" *Amy!* " Bazett yelled in alarm. She looked at Rider, her mind racing.

But Rider didn't notice either girls. She was suddenly aware that somehow, without her realizing, another presence had appeared on the pegasus. A horrible mass of warm, moving sludge threw itself on her back. As it began to pull Rider inside of it, Avenger's voice whispered, "Got...you..."

Rider screamed as she found herself being consumed. A tendril of goop stretched out and wrapped around her arms. When it reached the bridle, the entire set suddenly changed color, becoming a horrifying mix of red, purple, and black. The pegasus let out an unearthly shriek, and swooped back down again. Bazett realized that Amy was directly in the line of fire, and quickly reviewed her options;

1) Grab Amy pull her out harms way? Impossible, the pegasus was moving too fast to outrun.

2) Force Rider to redirect herself? Also impossible. There was no way a human could force a Servant to do anything without Command Seals. Even if she could keep up with the pegasus' speed.

Ultimately, it came down to how Bazett could beat pegasus to the punch. No matter what she decided, she wouldn't make it until Rider unwillingly ground Amy into Hedgehog-gravel. She realized that there was only one way to save her friend. Reaching into her suit, she pulled out a metal tube. Opening it up, she pulled out a metal blade, with a crystal ball at the end. On the section connecting the two, a metal ring with runes carved on the inside spun around. It was a special tool passed down through the Fraga clan, awarded to them for their faithful devotion to the Celtic Gods. It was a Noble Phantasm unconnected to a Heroic Spirit, one of the few left in the entire world. It was the ultimate trump card, the perfect counter.

As Bazett prepared launch the blade with her good arm, the Chaos Emerald in her other arm began to glow. Bazett felt a powerful heat surge within her, coursing through her Mage Circuits and into her weapon. Almost against her will, she punched the sphere and let the blade fly. A shockwave rippled through the area, the surroundings, the pegasus...

" *Fragarach!* "

Amy Rose was already dead. Bazett was too late. But when she fired her weapon, it was if the the universe went into the reverse. Time flowed backwards, and when it resumed, the one dying...was Rider.

Amy fell to the ground, her body returning to flesh. Confused, she looked around and saw Bazett on her knees, clutching her arm in pain. She still held the Chaos Emerald. The pink Hedgehog looked up and saw Rider's form dissolving into millions of tiny lights. Spark by spark, bit by bit, until she was gone.

However, she didn't see the half-form puddle of a man slinking off, melting into a storm drain.

That stings! Avenger thought as he crawled away. But at least I was able to get rid of Rider. Now that she's gone, this will go much, much, easier...

"All right, better luck next time."

Back at Shinji's motel room, Orbot shut off the communicator. The report he had gotten from Eggman was that the attack on the Einzberns Castle was unsuccessful. At least, that was what Orbot gleaned from the bad doctor's infuriated tirades, excuses, and many "I hate that Hedgehog"s. With a simulated sigh, Orbot tossed the Eggman Electric onto Shinji's bed. After Shinji staggered out of the room to clear his head after thirty-seven consecutive showers, he and Cubot were left to their own devices, which mostly consisted of watching daytime television and hiding when maid service came by to tidy up.

"You know, I think I like doing undercover work," Orbot commented, "At the very least, we- What are you doing?"

Cubot was currently pressing the side of his head against one of the walls adjacent you the door. It was an entirely aesthetic gesture, seeing as he didn't have proper ears. Nonetheless, Cubot held up a free hand while he cupped his other hand around his "ear".

"Quiet, I'm trying to eavesdrop." Cubot shushed.

Orbot stared at his counterpart. Then, with a shrug, he joined and mimicked Cubot. This was what they heard.

"... so I believed we fooled her. For now. I guess installing that secret passageway wasn't a silly idea after all. "

" Of course. Nothing the King decides is incorrect. "

The first voice had a reply to this, but it was so low that even the robots' finely designed sound receptors couldn't make it out. The only recognizable word was "Suction".

The second voice spoke again. "So? What word do you have from Lancer?"

Orbot and Cubot exchanged looks. "Lancer" was the name of one of the Servants in the Grail War.

" From what he's discovered, it seems there's been activity Near The Einzbern Forest. Eggman launched an attack on the Castle. From what he could observe, Eggman was forced to retreat. "

" Repulsed by my dear Saber, and that silly little tanuki , no doubt. "

" Actually, now that you mention it, there was mention that Shirou and Rin were there as well. You don't suppose they formed an alliance with Berserker? "

" Hmmm... "

There was a pause. The robots could vaguely hear the sound design of footsteps. One of the two men, or perhaps a third party that had not spoken yet.

The second voice spoke again. *" If they think allying themselves with that unthinking brute and doll will do them any good, it will not hurt to let them try. But perhaps I should be prepared to make my own move... "*

Cubot and Orbot looked at each other again.

"He sounds familiar." Cubot murmured.

To be continued

Einzbern Consultation Room

Taiga: Uhh...What? Where am I?

Irisviel: It's the Einzbern Consulation Room!

Taiga: Whaaaaaat?! *Shisho?!*

Irisviel: That's riiight! Wow, Zecchan, you've grown so much! You're almost like an adult, now!

Taiga: Thank you, I- Wait! What do you mean, "Almost"! And what is this place!?

Irisviel: You mean you don't remember? This is the place where we help Servants that have fallen pass on to the Holy Grail. The last time we did this was ten years ago!

Taiga: Hmm, now that you mention it... Eh? Someone's coming!

Irisviel: Please welcome our first guest, the Servant Rider, Medusa!

Rider: ...Hello...

Irisviel: Rider, you are the first casualty to die in the Holy Grail War, just like in the Fate Route! How do you feel?

Rider: Terrible... I let that demon manipulate me, and I failed to help Sakura.

Taiga: You know, I wonder why you didn't go to Sonic and Shirou for help. They would have gladly supported you.

Rider: Shirou, maybe...but Sonic...he's too much like Perseus. Too arrogant for my liking.

Irisviel: Oh, so you were constrained by an ancient grudge? That's silly. Sonic may act selfish, but he's one of the greatest heroes in the universe. You should have given him a chance.

Rider: But why did I lash out like that? When Avenger cut me, I just got angrier, and angrier...

Irisviel: Zouken created the Shadow from the sludge of the Fourth War's Grail. That sludge contains all of the world's evil. As a monster-class Servant, you were far more vulnerable to its taint,

especially since the two of you were connected via your bind to Sakura.

Rider: I'm not sure I like being reminded of how monstrous I am. Did Avenger get the Chaos Emerald?

Taiga: No, Bazett and Amy still have it. Which means that Caster has one, Sonic's group has one, Avenger has one, and now Amy and Bazett have one! Four down, three to go!

Rider: I should probably go myself. I'm not sure I want to stay here.

Irisviel: All right, have fun! And remember ***All will come to an end*** .

Taiga: Ehhh!?

Irisviel: Good bye, see you at the next session!

Night of Fate

Chapter 16: *Night of Fate*

It was late at night when a small fleet of cars drove into Fuyuki. Although, in truth, it wasn't so much a "Fleet of cars" As it was a trio of different vehicles. A rented van at the rear. Before that, a flatbed truck (also rented) with its cargo hidden by a large tarp. And leading in front was a brilliant red sports car. But had any outside observer gas known the truth about those automobiles, their drivers and passengers, and luggage, they would have agreed that, given the context, "Fleet" would be rather appropriate. The drivers were for war.

Holy War, to be precise.

After exploring the abandoned church to his satisfaction, Sonic radioed the group at the Castle and brought them up to speed. They agreed with his assumption that Caster and Kirie had fought recently. It would make sense, given the witch's recent actions. With multiple Servants under her control, Caster would need more Command Seals to better control them. And who had a surplus of Seals than the Overseer? The lack of a body told them that the priest must have escaped somehow, which meant Caster failed to gain more Seals. (Sonic did mention finding a locked door underneath the church, but that was put aside for later)

They decided to bring the gear they developed into the city that night for two reasons; the first being that Illya's Castle was still in disrepair, and they would sleep easier in quarters less prone to falling apart. The second reason was that Caster had, most likely, most definitely, had tapped into the Chaos Emerald's power For Her fight with Kirie, and probably other feats of Magecraft. And one thing the Mages had noticed was that for all of the energy the Chaos Emerald granted, the pressure of channeling that power was incredibly painful. Even someone of Medea's caliber would have exhausted herself using the

Emerald for extended periods of time. The alliance was going to strike while she was weak.

What none of them knew, or even suspected, was that their actions had an outside observer. While the entire group knew that the remaining Masters would undoubtedly be spying on the upcoming battle in hopes of finding an advantage, not even Illya, the most powerful Master of all, or Caster, now armed with exceptional power, would understand that a powerful entity was now taking a firm interest on the goings-on at the Ryuudou Temple.

A tall, handsome man with striking red eyes, clad in golden armor, stared down at the convoy and watched as the three cars separated. His focus stayed on the sports car as it drove towards the residential district.

In the backseat of the Mercedes-Benz driven by Sella, Shirou next to Illya. He was a bit surprised to learn that a child from a clan of "Proper" Mages would have such a well-kept car, but according to Illya, the car had been a gift to her mother from her father. The very idea made Shirou realize just how very little he knew about his father's past. Getting an idea, he put his hand on the back of the front seat and cast Structural Analysis.

Trace On. Shirou thought as he invoked the spell. Information flowed into his mind. The make of the car, what parts it was made of, Irisviel driving Saber to the Castle at breakneck speed while the Servant hung on for dear life...

Shirou gave a start. *Saber?!*

"Is something wrong, *Onii-chan* ?" Illya asked, noticing Shirou's reaction.

"Saber...Saber was in this car!" Shirou gasped, his mind reeling.
"With your mom, she...they were together, ten years ago!"

Illya shrugged. "Sure. Grandpa thought having King Arthur would help the Einzbern Clan win the Grail, so he got a catalyst to help Papa summon the Servant."

"But...Saber never said-!" Shirou exclaimed.

It had been jarring enough to learn that Kiritsugu had been part of the Holy War that resulted in the Great Fire of Fuyuki. That he had been a Master. But for Saber to have been his Servant to boot...!

Illya giggled. "Oh, *Onii-chan* , your ignorance is so adorable. That wasn't the same Saber."

"...What?"

"Through the power of Holy Grail, a chosen Master can summon a Heroic Spirit to act as a Servant," Illya explained, "Of course, what's really happening is that the Servant is actually a 'copy' taken from the Heroic Spirit's information left on the Throne of Heroes. This copy has all of the memories and feelings of the hero they are based on, along with powers from their life and legend. Therefore, even if the Grail uses the same hero twice, each summon will not have the experiences of a previous War."

Shirou tried to make sense of it. "So...the Saber Kiritsugu summoned...and the one we're going to rescue...are technically two different people? *It's like buying a car with the same manufacturer and model number as another vehicle. The same, but different...*

But there was something about that statement that Shirou couldn't accept. The way Illya described the process, it was so... *dehumanizing*. But Shirou was certain that Saber wasn't just a copy. Her voice, her feelings...her very presence had a definite realness that no Magecraft could simulate.

There must be something they were both missing.

While Tails and Rin stopped by the Tohsaka Mansion for "last minute supplies", Shirou decided to stop by his own house. He was a bit hesitant, as he wasn't sure who would be there. However, there was a secret weapon he felt would be needed if they were going to fight a mage from the Age of the Gods.

Thankfully, the place was empty. Taiga must have still been in the hospital. And Sakura probably was at her own home. Normally, Shirou would have given the place a good once-over to make sure it was still tidy (He cleaned up before he left, but you can never know what happened during an absence), but Shirou was in a hurry. He walked directly through the halls toward the backyard. Illya followed him quietly. As Shirou approached the supply shed, he stopped and turned to his sister.

"I just need to grab something from the back, then we'll head to the Temple," He assured her, "Just hold on, please. Wait right there."

Illya didn't reply. Instead, she sat right down on the steps. In fact, (Shirou would later realize) she sat right on the spot Kiritsugu had been sitting on when he died over five years ago.

Entering the shed, Shirou undid the lock on the trapdoor he and Sonic installed and reached down. Starting with the gun barrel, Shirou pulled out each and every one of Kiritsugu's armaments. Once he finished, he put them back, except for one item, and its ammunition; The Thompson Contender and its Origin Bullets. For a moment, Shirou wondered how he would explain the gun's functions to Illya without lying to her.

But Illya, watching emotionless from the stairs, said, "So, you do have Papa's guns after all."

Shirou did a check to see if the Contender was loaded (It wasn't) before responding. "You know what these are?"

"According to Grandfather, Papa liked to use guns when he fought instead of a Magecraft," Illya explained, "I thought you would use

them when we had our first battle, but you didn't."

Shirou had only taken two of the Origin Bullets, stuffing them in his pocket. He then walked over to Illya. He held up the Contender in the moonlight.

"I only found this yesterday, while cleaning up after Taiga," He said, "Kiritsugu never trained me to use these...in fact, he never wanted me to learn Magecraft at all. Even after I wore him down, he only taught me some very basic stuff. The very bare-bones fundamentals."

Shirou sat down next to Illya, taking care to keep hold of the gun on the side away from her. They both looked up at the night sky.

"He was such a careless guy, really. Always spacing out," Shirou went on, "He once told me that he would do what he enjoyed, and play around. You wouldn't tell just by looking at him that he was a Mage. But I think that's what I admired about him. He was completely free from the responsibilities and burdens most Mages put on themselves. Don't tell Rin I said this, but I think a heretic like him was closer to being a wizard than the traditional Mage families... at least in terms of wisdom."

Shirou realized that talking about his father had brought a smile to his face. But when he looked down at Illya, that smile vanished. The little Master had a crestfallen look on her face. No doubt thinking about Kiritsugu was having a different effect. She still had mixed feelings on the father that, for all she knew, had abandoned her.

"But...I could tell that he definitely had regrets about his life. I just never thought about them until you told me about him," He patted her on the back, saying, "After we beat Caster, I'll take you to Kiritsugu's grave. I'm sure he'll be happy to know you came to his homeland."

Illya smiled a bit. But she still looked a little sad. Wiping her eyes, she stood up. The sadness was gone from her face. The expression

was that of resolute determination.

"We have to go, or we're going to be late." She declared.

Shirou noticed that she sounded older with those words than she had before. A lot older...

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Sonic was speeding back towards the Emiya Estate, intent on meeting up with Shirou there. Back at the church, the Hedgehog had found a chamber that had been locked, but before he could knock the door down, a squad of special ops soldiers swarmed into building and down in to the passage ways. Apparently, the giant skeleton trap Caster left behind had been tied to the surrounding Boundary Field

that kept the property off of the radar. When Sonic destroyed the attacking familiar, it broke the spell over the church.

Funny how all of those soldiers showed so quickly, Sonic thought as he cut through a park, You'd think the Boundary Field would have kept the noise level down...

Before Sonic could put more thought into the subject, something caught his eye and he stopped. At a much, much, *much* slower pace, he jogged up to a sad figure sitting alone on a bench. While he hadn't been able to get a good look at her face, he recognized the lonely girl's purple hair and hair ribbon.

It was Shirou's underclassman, Sakura.

She was sitting very still, her head drooping down like a dying flower. If it wasn't for the occasional shiver, Sonic would have mistaken her for a mannequin. Her hair was unkempt and windblown, although Sonic had a feeling that was his fault more than anything.

His own quills drooping in concern, Sonic reached out and asked, "Are you all right?"

Sakura didn't answer at first. But after a few seconds, she turned towards the Hedgehog. Even in the gloom of night, he could see the bags under her eyes in the moonlight.

"How is *senpai*? " She asked quietly. Sonic's must have straightened, because she added, "I've noticed you watching us at breakfast. You and him and Saber are...so close."

Was that longing in her voice? Sonic wasn't sure. But it was clear that Sakura was more observant than anyone suspected.

"He's going to keep fighting, isn't he?" Sakura asked, her tone sad. "Even though he lost his Servant..."

So Sakura knew about Servants. Shinji claimed she had been ignorant of the War, but he had clearly been mistaken. Or perhaps just another liar...

But, this wasn't the time for that. This girl was definitely worried for her friend. Sonic hopped onto the bench and gave Sakura a friendly pat on the back. She instantly flinched away, but took no other action.

Jeez, What's this girl been through? Sonic thought, concerned. But instead of commenting on it, he said, "Shirou's fine. And we're going to get Saber back, too. Caster doesn't stand a chance!"

Sonic flashed Sakura his trademark grin and punched his empty palm. But Sakura just looked at him. It wasn't a happy look, nor was it a sad one. It was the expression of someone who had long ago given up on trying to make anything of themselves.

Totally empty. Spent.

Finally, Sakura said, "Of course you believe that. Knuckles told me about your world. But you don't know what this world is like," She began to shake. "Heroes don't get happy endings...people aren't saved...anyone who tries to change how things are die...we all die..." Sakura clutched her head as she began to hyperventilate. "We're all going to die...!"

Sonic reached and took Sakura 's shoulders. "Hey, hey, it's going to be all right. Trust me."

It took a few minutes for Sakura to calm down. Once she did, Sonic continued, "I dunno what Knux told you, but my world isn't all honey and roses. We've had our fair share of trouble, really messed up stuff you might find familiar. I'll spare you the details. But let me show you why I think everything's going to turn out okay."

Sonic hopped down off of the bench and held out his arms to Sakura. Confused, Sakura slowly stood up and reached, but instead

of taking her hand, Sonic scooped the high schoolgirl up and took off. Sakura gave a slight gasp but only watched wide-eyed as the world around her became a blur. When Sonic stopped, she found herself on a hill. Although she didn't know it, this was the very same hill Sonic tripped Berserker up on only a few days ago. The deep skid marks Berserker made when he tumbled were still there, but not visible in the darkness. But Sonic's gaze was going in the opposite direction, which Sakura followed up at the countless stars that filled the sky.

"Just look at that sky," Sonic said, "Even on my world, we've got our pollution problems. Big factories creating more smog than we can handle. Usually Eggman's. But no matter how thick or wide all that smoke is, you can always find a place where there's nothing between you and the stars. Sometimes you just gotta go a little further to find it."

At first, Sakura didn't respond. But as she stared up at the night, she asked, "But...what if someone will stop you from finding that place? What if you're trapped?"

Sonic grinned, stretching a little. "Well, if there *is* someone trying to keep you down...you just gotta break free of them."

Sakura looked down at Sonic, his eyes wavering. "But..."

Sonic looked directly into her eyes. "And if you're worried you can't do it yourself, don't be afraid to ask for help. There's always someone out there."

Sakura looked away, apparently unconvinced. It was plain that whatever chip on her shoulder wasn't going to go away easily. But Sonic decided not to dig. It wasn't his place, and really, he wasn't a therapist. All he could really do without fail was reassure the girl and set his example.

"We're gonna beat Caster, I promise." Sonic said, and patted Sakura on the back.

This time, she didn't flinch.

Rin didn't expect to stay for long at her family's mansion. In fact, she was worried that the detour would make her late for the assault on Ryuudou Temple. As their rented truck pulled up, Rin was already unbecomingly unbuckling her seat belt and leaping out of cab.

"Just leave the truck parked here," She called out as she ran towards the front door, "We can reach Ryuudou on foot and unload your plane later."

Tails, in the driver's seat, nodded. Getting out, he began to unhook the elaborate system of gears and levers that allowed his someone with his short stature to drive. It had been installed by one of Illya's maids (he couldn't tell which- they look and dress virtually alike) so Tails could drive the truck through the city, with the maids driving the other two cars. While Rin fiddled with the electronic lock he had devised and installed before they left (Cursing just a little bit) Tails took the tarp off of the *Tornado* and gave the biplane a quick check-up. As he worked, a glint of light to the side caught his eye.

Rin didn't not run through her mansion's halls. She marched quickly, with purpose. And that purpose was to check up on an experiment she had set into motion not long after Tails crash-landed in her backyard. With the death of both her father and mother, there were plenty of empty rooms inside the Mansion, and one of those rooms was on the upper floors.

Ever since Tails built his...Ring-machine, Rin had been hard-pressed to match the technology with Magecraft. Working late at night, she had Archer bring up the data on Ring Synthesis contained inside of the Miles Electric. In the nights since then, she had wracked her brains trying apply the synthesizing formula to Magecraft. Archer had done the manual labor in setting up the apparatus, but that was a relatively minor burden he lifted. The mental stress of adjusting the

otherworldly science to thaumegectal pushed Rin to the brink, which, combined with lack of sleep, made her snappy and irritable.

And now it was time to see how the experiment entire played out. Rin entered the side room cautiously, not wanting to set off an explosion with abrupt movement. The room she entered was small, but had comparatively large windows on each wall. A series of arranged mirrors ensured that the sunlight would be focused on the center of the room. In the center was an old wash tub, unused since the first Tohsakah learned what a laundromat was. Runes had been painted all over the floor, but patterned in a spiral formation, so that the harnessed flow of energy would be directed into the bottom of the tub. On the bottom were a ring of carefully aligned precious stones. The tub itself had been filled almost to the top with clean water taken directly from a Koi pond.

And floating on the water's surface, like a tiny inner tube, was a jasper stone.

Rin put on a single protective glove on her good hand. She then used that hand to take a pair of tongs and fish the gem out. It was the first practical experiment in drawing energy from the sun itself to empower the Tohsakah Clan's Magecraft. As it was, the jewel was rather useless. While she could sense power from it, the energy was too erratic to pull into her own Mage Circuits or used to bolster other spells. The current gem was just power waiting to be unleashed. More experiments would be needed to be done if Rin wanted to use the jewel effectively.

But there would be time for that later. Rin put the jasper into a glass jar and locked it in a dusty drawer. It had been risky letting go the experiment go on unsupervised for so long, and Rin was glad that the house hadn't blown up while she was at the Einzbern's Castle.

Running to her workshop in the basement, Rin opened a small case and found it. It was a small, ornate dagger. It had been willed to her by her father during the Fourth Holy Grail War, and with his unfortunate passing, been given to her by Kotomine.

The Azoth Sword.

Technically, it wasn't the *only* Azoth Sword. In fact, it was one of the most common types of Mystic Codes in the entire Mages Association. Students and heirs were often given Azoth Swords by their teachers and parents as a Coming-Of-Age present. The one Rin had was made with a slightly shorter blade and had AZOTH carved into the hilt at Tokiomi's preference, of course, so in that regard it was different from the usual of ones. Such artifacts were used mostly for aid in spellcasting, and while the sharp edges would wound or kill a human as well as a non-medical sword, the Azoth would crumble to dust if used against a Servant.

Rin slid the sword into a sheath and hid it inside her shirt. With a nod, she turned and ran back up the stairs. When she got back outside, Tails was nowhere to be seen.

"Tails?" She looked around. "Tails?!"

"Right here!"

Speak of the *kitsune*, Rin's furry sidekick (A term she used primarily in her mind, as Tails would insist that he was *Sonic's* sidekick) came around the corner of the mansion, pushing...a lot of junk that was impersonating a scooter.

"We can ride to the shrine on this!" Tails explained eagerly, "I put all of the Rings from the forger into the fuel tank, so we should have enough power to get us in time," He looked at his watch awkwardly. "We may have to jump a few fences..."

This is my life now, Rin thought, sighing. *I feel like a character in an anime* .

The roar of the scooter's motor echoed through the night air...

Sonic, Tails, Rin, Shirou, and Illya- in three separate parties, mind-met up at the bottom of the stairs that led to Ryuudou Temple. Illya's maid Leysritt was already there, and she did not look like a maid. Instead of her dress had been replaced by a colorful set of metal armor. She looked like a character from a *sentai* show. When Sella arrived from where she parked Illya's car, she had her own set of armor.

"Does everyone remember the plan?" Rin asked.

Everyone else nodded. They had discussed it at length at the Castle. With so many spells Caster could prepare, there were too many variables to prepare for, but they managed to work out an outline.

The goal of the operation was to restrict the movements of Caster's strongest assets- Namely, the Servants she had stolen, and the Chaos Emerald. Berserker would take care of take of the former. Even when restrained, his brute strength should allow him to withstand the assault of three attacking Servants. Tails had fitted the demigod with a specialized pair of heat-vision goggles so Berserker could find Assassin, so him trying to take any by surprise with his Presence Concealment was out. Shirou had worried that Berserker might kill Saber by accident, but Illya assured him that the giant Servant would only keep the knight busy and would not strike a killing blow. Archer, on the other hand, was not going to receive such mercy (Shirou wasn't so concerned about *that* Judas).

Meanwhile, a team consisting of Sonic, Tails, and Shirou would try to locate and retrieve the Chaos Emerald hidden within Caster's lair. While there was the possibility that the witch would keep the Emerald on her person, it was just as likely that it would be stored someplace to empower the spells cast over her lair. This way, Caster could focus on her own offensive Magecraft without risking an energy burn-out from the Emerald's potency. With Shirou's Projected Rulebreaker and the Anti-Emerald, they try to shut down Caster's workshop from the source.

Which meant the task of fighting Caster and Kazuki fell to Rin, Illya, and the maids. Naturally, the rest of the group felt concerned, especially since Berserker would be preoccupied fighting the stolen Servants. From what they'd been told, normal humans fighting a Servant, especially one that did not have to worry about Prana deficiency, was several miles beyond suicidal. And Kazuki was no slouch himself when it came to fighting. But Illya assured that her maids would be more than a match for the teacher. As for Caster...

("While it is true human beings can't stand equally with Servants, that's only in general," Rin had said during the war meeting back at the Castle, "If certain conditions are met, a Mage with decent skills can kill a Servant instantly.")

"What kind of conditions?" Sonic had asked, intrigued.

And at that, Rin had smirked.)

Back in the present, Sonic was the first up the stairs to the Temple gate. The minute he reached the top, he called back down, "No one's here!"

When the rest of the group caught up, (Berserker, for some reason, walked very slowly) they saw that Sonic was correct. The entire Temple grounds and dwellings were abandoned.

Shirou fidgeted in his jacket. It was as if he had something inside of it, besides his body. "Where did they go?"

"They were here earlier," Tails said, pulling out his Miles Electric. As it booted up, he asked, "Yeah, there's a still a huge energy reading in this spot. But it's...different, then how it used to be."

Sonic was already running around the grounds at high speed, searching every building and turning over almost every stone. When he heard Tails' words, he stopped what he was doing and ran up to them.

"Different? How?" He asked.

Tails adjusted his gadget's settings a bit more before answering. "I think it's more like they're...below us?"

Sonic and Shirou exchanged looks. The same question echoed through their minds. Below? How would Caster move her operations underground?

Shirou was about to tell Rin, but he saw that she was already running back down the stairs. Shirou signaled to the rest to follow, and ran after her. Sonic rushed past and saw Rin jump off the steps and into the mountain to the right. Catching up, he waited until they reached a large boulder lying in the ground against the incline of the mountain before speaking.

"What's this?" Sonic asked.

"Something I sensed during the walk up," Rin explained, "I didn't understand what it meant until we found the Temple empty..."

She placed her hand on the rock, and began to mutter in a language Sonic didn't understand or recognize. Once she reached the end of the chant, the rock began to glow, and it vanished entirely. In its place there was a tunnel that seemed to go directly into the mountain path. A crunching heard as the rest of the group caught up. Rin and Sonic turned to them.

"Down here." Rin called out softly, and led the way.

Archer, invisible to all on top of the Ryuudou Temple gate, watched them. His eyes narrowed as each of them entered the tunnel leading to Caster's lair.

So, they're here, He thought, Time to make my choice.

As Archer waited for the entire group to go into the mountain, he felt something. It was a powerful presence entering the Ryuudou Temple Boundary Field. Archer looked around intently, trying to zero in on the intruder with Reinforced vision. However, nothing dangerous could be seen. But Archer knew that something was there. Something vile, something dangerous...

Something familiar.

The rest of the group had to run to catch up with Sonic. When they did, they found themselves standing in an immensely large cavern, the size of a small village, and then some. It had to be, to fit the numerous Greco-Roman temples and buildings that dotted the area. They all surrounded a giant empty dip in the ground, from which a bright red light could be seen.

Tails gaped, but recovered quickly. "Gotta admit, this sure beats a gingerbread house!"

"But where did all of this come from?" Shirou asked, stunned at the grandeur.

"This is probably- no, it's definitely Caster's doing," Rin said confidently, "Her rank in Territory Creation is A. I wouldn't have expected anything less," She then frowned, "Actually, considering the power she has access to, this complex seems rather low-key."

"You're telling *me* ," Sonic remarked, shaking his head. "An elaborate, underground temple complex and not single loop-de-loop? Talk about uncreative."

Having become fully associated with Sonic's attitude and given an in-depth idea of what his world was like, Shirou and Rin resisted the urge to take the bait. Sella and Leysritt, lacking the proper emotional capacity for anything besides tending to Illya's whims, had no urges to resist, save an urge to cuddle Tails and never let go on Sella's part. Berserker had no resistance to any of his urges, which

consisted mostly of beating anything within arms reach to death, but the firm grip his Master had on his mental leash kept the bloodlust from being expressed as anything other than an irritated growl. And Tails already knew the answer, so it fell to the aforementioned Master to ask the question with an obvious answer.

"Why would there be loops in a temple?" Illya asked, genuinely curious.

Sonic began to stretch a little. "To make the temple run more exciting, duh."

Illya's face scrunched up in thought. "More exciting than the lair of a Heroic Spirit with knowledge of Magecraft from the Age of the Gods, empowered by an artifact from a parallel universe? This entire cavern has so much Magecraft that I'm surprised we got this far. What could be more exciting than *that*?"

"All of that *and* loop-de-loops." Sonic said matter-of-factly, and rubbed his hands together "That would be awesome."

"Don't worry, there'll be plenty of excitement once we get started," Rin said, annoyed at Sonic's inability to take the situation seriously. "First, Let's figure out where we need to go."

"I can't see Caster, Kazuki, or either of our Servants," Shirou reported, scanning the area with Reinforced eyes. "But that place in the center...that's the Chaos Emerald, isn't it?"

"Must be," Tails agreed, checking the Miles Electric's readings. "Yup! That's where the highest concentration of energy is."

"Then Let's do it to it!" Sonic declared, preparing to run.

Sonic took off, zipping down the stairs leading into the complex. Not one to be left out, Berserker let loose a roar and charged after him. Tails began to spin his tails and flew through the air, but in a direct

horizontal line. He would drop down next to Sonic when he stopped. The maids were next to go, followed by Shirou, Rin, and Illya.

"I'll catch up with Sonic and Tails," Shirou told the girls, "Are you *sure* the two of you will be all right on your own?"

"For the last time, yes , Emiya *-kun*, " Rin said, "Just focus on keeping those two maniacs out of trouble until you reach the Emerald. They may have speed and weird gadgets, but they *don't* have magical senses- But you do. They'll need your nack for sniffing out-"

And before Rin (or anyone for that matter) could say "Curses", the entire layout of the temple complex changed. This wasn't a simple flash followed by, "Whoa, everything's different!" It was an architectural metamorphosis that blew the unaware off of their feet. Literally.

First, the floor began to move. Like a massive wheel in a clockwork device, different sections of the diameter began to spin in opposing directions around d the center. And at the same time, the buildings began to shift back and forth, pieces flying to and fro in a madcap, sideways version of Tetris. The end result looked like if you took pieces of buildings in a model city, mixed them up, and glued some on askew.

Knuckles woke up with a start and a bad headache. Not to mention a stiff back. It was if he had fallen asleep in a cocoon made metal...

Knuckles looked at himself. Oh. Right.

Knuckles tried to recall what he was doing before he fell asleep, and found that to be an uphill battle. The buzz in the back of his mind made recollections difficult. Luckily, Knuckles was as stubborn as he was strong. And considering that he could punch stone walls down and lift trees, this said something about his determination.

Because Knuckles was forcing his brain to do the most important job of all, he didn't notice the ornate, crooked dagger lying on the floor a few inches away. The dagger then dissolved away in a stream of fading light, leaving no trace that it had even existed.

Meanwhile, Knuckles was developing a slow burn, mentally speaking. Once he remembered that who Caster was, he also began to see their previous interactions in a different light. Words of kindness that had been spoken now sounded patronizing. Knuckles didn't like being patronized, especially from people who played him for a sap.

Taking a deep breath, Knuckles began to push against his chains. In a more dramatic universe, the Echidna would have exploded from his binds with such aplomb that an audience would have appeared for the sole purpose of giving him a standing ovation. No such luck, here.

Struggling and straining, Knuckles eventually wriggled one arm out of the nest of links. Clenching his fist, he punched the chains, causing his entire body to sway. Getting an idea, Knuckles began to swing himself back and forth, going higher and higher. Soon enough, his trajectory curved so he could grab the chains suspending him from the ceiling. Grinning, Knuckles began to pull and tug. Sweat began to appear on his forehead as he yanked harder and harder. It wasn't long before a cracking sound could be heard, and one of the chains broke away from the ceiling. After that, it was easy to unravel the rest, freeing Knuckles. The Echidna exhaled a bit as he pumped arm he used. Walking out of the room, he found d himself standing in some of... *collection* of mismatched, interwoven buildings. Like a three-dimensional labyrinth. Knuckles looked around in every direction he could think. Far off in the center of it all was a glowing dot that was undoubtedly the Chaos Emerald. Knuckles first instinct was to glide over and claim the jewel, but he heard a laughter that caught his attention. Looking up, he saw high on the top of the labyrinth was none other than the ones responsible for his current predicament.

Caster, and her husband-to-be, Souchirou Kazuki.

Sonic had been just at the edge of the center when the entire city began to spin. And while he was fast, having the road move underfoot through off his balance just enough for a wayward wall that used to be a floor to catch and scoop him up. By the time everything stopped moving, he found himself at the far edge of a temple-themed maze.

"Whoa, talk about a spin cycle..." Sonic muttered, getting to his feet. He flipped on his communicator's party line and began to talk. "Is everyone okay? This is Sonic. You guys there?"

Shirou was the first to respond. "I'm...fine, just a bit dizzy. What happened?"

"The entire layout of the temple changed!" Tails piped up, "I can't see anyone else nearby...can any of you see me?"

" / can't," Rin said, "Damn...I guess it was too easy at first...Caster must have set this entire place up to twist around if someone found-Kya!" There was a crashing sound. "Look out! Caster's minions are starting to come out of the wood work!"

Sonic could see it. The Dragon Tooth Warriors were appearing, popping out from behind corners in the distance, prowling the corridors, and waiting at walls.

"So? Don't tell me you're afraid of those low-budget constructs, Miss Tohsaka." Illya teased playfully.

"Hmph! As if! But even bugs can be annoying if you let them get underfoot!"

"What should be our next move?" Shirou asked, "Should we try to meet up somewhere?"

Sonic thought for a moment, then said, "Sure- the center. That's where we were heading before. And if we bump into each other along the way, even better. Sound good?"

There was a pause.

"We don't have much of a choice," Rin said, "Watch you backs."

Shirou said, "We need to keep moving. If we stay in one place, Caster will ensnare us again. Whatever happens, don't slow down."

"That's never a problem for *us* ," Tails laughed, "Turn on your GPS' so you'll know if you get near someone!"

"Okay, guys, like I said before..." Sonic punched the palm of his hand, " *Let's do this!* "

Sonic took off, heading down the winding corridor in front of him. A pair of skeletons- the Dragon Tooth Warriors -blocked his path. Rather than do anything fancy such as jump over them, Sonic easily zipped by them through the gap between their skeletal bodies. As he passed them, he pulled out their sacrum. The "boneheads" instantly fell to pieces. Looking back, Sonic saw that the Warriors desperately trying to move, in spite of their disconnected state. Returning his gaze to the front, Sonic saw some more Dragon Tooth Warriors, armed with primitive swords and spears. Winding up, Sonic threw the bones he stole and lobbed them at the Warriors in the front. The sonic-speed momentum of the bones knocked the first group of warriors down, and Sonic followed up by hitting the rest with a series of Homing Attacks. With the way cleared, Sonic sped on, zipping around corners and over stairs.

All over the labyrinth, the assembled alliance was doing whatever they could to navigate the treacherous, winding passageways, and the undead guards that patrolled it.

Thanks to her lifetime of physical conditioning and thaumaturgical training, Rin became a blur by Reinforcing her body. While she wasn't as fast as Sonic, her speed was enough to take the Dragon Tooth Warriors by the surprise, and the martial arts she learned from Kotomine allowed her to destroy them almost instantly. But as invigorating her triumphs were, Rin wasn't sure she had time to pat her back.

Caster set this trap to split us apart, I'm sure of it, She thought as she jumped over a wall, She could pick us off one-by-one...she'd better start with me!

Tails, meanwhile, had a different approach. Rather than just roam around endlessly, he took to the air, flying as high as his copter-ing could allow. Once he reached the top of a wall, he took out a pair of binoculars and began to scope out the maze. From what he could see, the center of the lair where the Chaos Emerald had become completely enclosed in a dome made from both rock and magic. There seemed to be only one entrance. Tails tried to see who was closest to the entrance, but with the winding passages, areas obscured by mismatched roofs and the usual floating platforms that moved around, it was hard to make any exact estimations. From what he could tell, Illya's maids had managed to stick together, and were fighting off Dragon Tooth Warriors far to the east. However, he couldn't see anyone else at the time.

A loud series of crashes from the southwest caught his attention. Tails looked, and saw what looked like a living avalanche tearing pushing its way through the walls of the labyrinth.

There's Berserker, Tails thought, Looks like he's going to reach the Emerald first...

The more Tails thought about it, the stranger it seemed that Caster would willingly leave the only path to the source of her power available. Granted, *Eggman* did things like that, but he was called a Mad Scientist for a reason. But why would Caster allow the opening to be unguarded. Concerned, he flipped a switch and turned his

scope to Prana-vision. Focusing on the area before the doorway, the binoculars picked up a mass of energy stationed in the center. One that had a very familiar shape...

Tails realized with a start who it was. Turning on his communicator, he said, "Illya, this is Tails, do you copy? We need you to take control of Berserker, stat!"

Berserker was never in a good mood, but a new primal terror had been mixed with the usual belligerence. Being separated from his Master, with no clear enemy to annihilate, was like a hot arrow shooting through the fog of ignorance surrounding his conscious mind, causing an image of a bloodied child to flash by in his thoughts. He had only the vaguest idea who that child was, but the idea of Illya ending up the same way only served to increase his negativity. He needed to find his Master, and nothing, not even this weird construction, would stand in his way. If the mighty Herakles had been allowed to call upon his full mental facilities, he would have navigated the maze carefully, marking his path to avoid going in circles. But for the Servant Berserker, there was only one true path to follow- Namely, the one that was directly in front of him. The fact that there seemed to be a never-ending supply of walls and skeletons was a such a minor trifle that Berserker passed over them with the ease of an actor in a *Toku* production. However, the constant crashing and clattering worked on his nerves.

Since Berserker wasn't really able to keep track of time in his state, he had no idea of how long it took him to reach the open area. In fact, he would have just passed through it instantly as his Master could not be seen, when her words appeared in his mind.

Berserker! Stop!

And Berserker did stop, but not because he was ordered to. It was just confusing that the information came to his turbulent brain without going through the ears. But as he looked around for his Master, he saw that a new challenger appeared. It was none other than the

Servant Saber. Only she looked different. The Saber he fought at the graveyard didn't have so many golden runes on her armor. And her sword no longer had the Invisible Air surrounding it. There was no point, not after Saber unleashed Excalibur in the airspace in Japan's ocean. Along the side of the blade were more runes, seven in total, aligned vertically. Of the new runes, only the one at the bottom was glowing.

Of course, Berserker didn't register this. All that mattered to him was that an enemy was in front of him and the only thing you could do to an enemy was... *destroy them!* He threw himself at Saber, pulling his sword back and prepared to bring it down on his foe.

No, Berserker! His Master's mouthless voice told him, *Don't attack with all of your might!*

At the last minute, Berserker halted his strike before it could strike Saber. But even though he didn't make contact, the force from his motion created a sharp gale that shook the walls. But Saber was already in motion herself, spinning around Berserker's assault and striking at his exposed chest.

Berserker barely felt the attack, but he roared in fury anyway.

Rin had lost both track of time and the skeletons, but she was fairly certain that she was on the right path. "Fairly" In the sense that she so far had not run into any of the markings she had made to avoid going in circles. She had also ceased running with Reinforced legs to avoid expending her reserves of Prana, and was simply jogging at a brisk pace. Reaching a corner, Rin paused, and looked up. Not for the first time, she contemplated scaling the wall and running along the top, and as always, it was too high with no effective footholds. While the walls *looked* like they had been made from bricks, their surface was so smooth that they might as well have grown out from the ground. Given what kind of spells Caster had access to, that was not an unreasonable assumption.

The only way to get up these things is either to fly, or have natural spikes in your limbs... Rin thought, annoyed.

As she continued through the maze, Rin became aware of a rumbling, crashing sound in the distance. Slowing down, Rin hoped she wasn't approaching an insidious trap Caster had set up. Or worse, and more likely, Berserker was just around the corner and not paying attention to what or who was in front of him.

As she turned the corner, Rin found a large archway leading into a wide area. It was from there that the cacophony was loudest. And for good reason. Berserker and a clearly tricked-out Saber were engaged in heated combat. Apparently, Saber had been put in charge of guarding the Chaos Emerald, and was doing a fantastic job of keeping the brute at bay. And although she didn't want to admit it, she was impressed. Not only had Saber's natural abilities jumped up from the Prana she received from Caster and the Emerald, but the witch had seen fit to enhance Saber with various runes. You didn't have to be a Mage to see the significant gap between Saber with Shirou as Master and the Saber controlled by Caster. With her new enhancements, Saber wasn't just fighting Berserker on equal grounds, but was slowly overwhelming him with pure skill. Only the demigods sheer strength and speed kept him from being destroyed.

Something bothered Rin, and she Reinforced her eyes to get a better look. She soon saw that Saber was actually striking Berserker- but it seemed that her sword couldn't pierce the skin's Defense. Rin remembered hearing Illya gloat at how Berserker had the ability to "Evolve" his defense- Any attack that managed to wound him would not only be undone, but he would become immune to that type of blow.

I can't believe Caster would equip Saber with all sorts of enhancements, and forget to add on to her sword... Rin thought, *Is there something here I'm missing?*

No sooner had the thought appeared Rin's mind did the situation change. Breaking away from Berserker, Saber sidestepped his

inevitable charge and tapped one of the extra runes on her sword. A bright green wind appeared from the hilt, coating the blade in an turquoise energy. Pivoting on her heels, Saber launched at Berserker. As Berserker whirled about to cleave his assailant, and soon found his own weapon's momentum being redirected upwards. With his chest exposed, Saber stabbed her weapon forward, spearing Berserker through the abdomen and pushing his heart out the other end. She reclaimed her blade and leapt away as Berserker stumbled forward as a natural consequence of the dire wound he received. But before he could land, the gaping hole in his chest filled up, and the beating organ on Saber's sword had dissolved away. Standing up, Berserker shot Saber a glare that had more venom than the insect population of Austrailia.

Saber's sword was now purple.

All of these actions were observed by Caster and Souichirou, watching from a safe alcove high above the labyrinth. It had been originally on the floor near the Chaos Emerald, but after Sonic tripped the rearrangement rune Magecraft, the shelter had been repositioned to a more distant altitude. It was suspended on a stack of twisted columns, with stairs or ladders for anyone else to use. Caster had designed the shelter to only be accessible for those who could either fly or teleport. The only alternative would be to have the power to climb a completely smooth vertical wall. And because this third option was impossible for a non -servant, Caster felt perfectly at ease focusing on the events happening below.

"Excellent! The runes are working perfectly!" Caster chortled, watching as Saber's sword cleaved through Berserker ' s abdomen. "My new and improved Saber is making mincemeat out of that doll's musclehead!"

Kazuki was, as always, stonefaced and apparently unmoved. He said, "Caster, I won't claim to understand these Grail Wars, and I won't stop any action you take, but from what you've told me, these

Berserker exhaust themselves immensely. Now that we've separated them, shouldn't we take this chance to kill his Master?"

Caster nodded. "You're right, that'd be the ideal solution. However, circumstances mean we need to be a different sort of pragmatic."

Caster waved her hand, and a purple flame appeared over the palm. The size of the fireball grew like a balloon, and an image Illya appeared inside of the flames.

"According to my divinations, the Master of Berserker is the chosen vessel of the Holy Grail, Souichiro-sama," Caster explained, "When each Servant dies, their energy enters the vessel. Once every Servant enters the vessel, that vessel will become a doorway to the Holy Grail. While my own ritual will forego the need to kill the other Servants, having the intended vessel in custody will smooth out the process."

And given the... *spicy* ...nature of Chaos Emerald's energy, having some local flavor (in a manner of speaking) would be pragmatic. In fact, she may have to go back to her original plan, just to be safe. When the witch had learned that all one truly needed was immense quantities of Prana to create Holy Grail, she had conceived of a ritual that would acquire that energy by draining the entire city's population, which was why she had set up camp at the Ryuudou Temple, to gain control of Fuyuki 's leylines. When Knuckles had told her about the Chaos Emeralds, Caster had been delighted at the idea of avoiding wholesale genocide. But given how stressful managing Emerald's energies were, she might want to drain just a little bit from Fuyuki to balance out the alien gem's power.

But as touch-and-go the whole event will be, it will be worth it. Once she had the power of the Holy Grail at her disposal, becoming a fully-human presence in the physical world would be a cinch. And then there would be nothing standing in the way of her and Souichiro...

Caster's musings were interrupted when her Master inhaled sharply. It wasn't much of expression, but coming from someone as stoic as Kazuki, it came as loud as a thunderclap.

And speaking of thunder, a similar sound echoed throughout the entire labyrinth when a gloved, spiked fist slammed into the side of her head. Caster's world became a throbbing blur, and the only sensation she could accurately comprehend at this point was that her body seemed to be moving of its own accord at an alarming velocity.

Knuckles watched as Caster went flying from the alcove, smiling as she crashed very abruptly into the maze. While he wasn't someone who enjoyed hitting women specifically, he got a certain pleasure giving unscrupulous manipulators a gap where their front teeth used to be. But he wasn't so pleased that he didn't hear the sound of movement coming from behind. Knuckles turned and hopped to the side just in time to avoid having his neck broken by Kazuki's death strike. Knuckles' fists were up as he instantly took a boxing stance. His opponent had already resumed his own fighting stance.

"How did you get out of your chains?" Kazuki asked firmly. He didn't sound angry. He spoke with the same tone as he would when asking, "Why are your test answers identical to Takeru's, whom you sit next to every day?" It was a solid voice, like a giant boulder on a path. Unmoving, unyielding.

But his eyes were different. There was a fire within them Knuckles had never seen before. Or perhaps the fire was always there, and usually the glasses Kazuki wore kept people from noticing. The Master certainly wasn't wearing any then.

So Knuckles, knowing that his answer didn't matter (Not that he had one) just smirked. "I've got a better question- which one of you put me in them first?"

For the briefest, longest moment, neither men said anything. It lasted two seconds, but the silence was so thick that it stretched the time it

took from one glare to reach the other.

And then, they *moved* .

On the outside, on the unbeaten path, stood Archer.

Actually, it wasn't Archer. It was the man who *used* to be Archer. And he was staring intently at the entrance of the tunnel leading into the Ryuudou Mountain.

How interesting, He thought, not only is my dear Saber within this hole, but the doll that shall hold the next Grail as well. And a few of those gems, to boot.

The ex-Archer did not wonder on the remarkable coincidence that everything he wanted- no, *needed* - no, *deserved to have* - were now contained in one easy to invade location. From the very beginning of human history, he had been preordained to own everything going of value in the world. Even if some of those things came from a different world. All things, all people, were his to have.

And it was with that mentality that Gilgamesh strode into the tunnel, into the mountain. And had he been remotely interested in the floor of the tunnel, he would seen the numerous claw marks, tank treads and irregular footprints trailing in. And while he subconsciously noted the smell of jet exhaust in the air, his brain simply ignored his nose.

After all, he had more important matters to consider. He always did.

To be continued

Tiger Dojo:

Taiga: Once more, at the end of the chapter, it's the Tiger Dojo! I am your presiding teacher, Fujimura Taiga, here to dispense wisdom!

Illya: And the Number One Student, Illya, here to dispense *actual* wisdom, is here as well!

Taiga: Ohhh! After so very long, we are reunited! We should celebrate byyyyyy answering the questions!

Illya: Our first letter is from Doctor Lecture Sith. He writes, "How much you knows about Kamen Rider?" What kind of grammar is that?

Taiga: That's right, you're grammar is atrocious, even for the internet! However, we here at Fate/Genesis, inc. are not intimately familiar with the *Kamen Rider* franchise, or it's affiliates.

Illya: In one special chapter of the *All-Around Type-Moon* manga, what was undoubtably a younger version of *Onii-Chan* talking to the Fourth Rider about his dreams for the future. Apparently, when he was a child, *Onii-Chan* wanted to be the Kamen Rider when he grew up!

Taiga: Now he wants to be just a Hero of Justice! Looks like Shirou hasn't changed very much at all, did he?

Illya: Poor *Onii-Chan* , the trauma of the Fire really caused your maturity to stall, hasn't it?

Taiga: Our next question comes from tl34lt12. They write, "Would Waver join the plot?" Ahh! Are you talking about that nice cutie from England I met ten years ago!?

Illya: Waver Velvet, now known as Lord E-Melloi II of Clock Tower, would probably love to get involved in what's happening in Fuyuki. However, I've heard that he's too busy trying to keep the other Lords of the Mage's Association from condemning the city to a fiery death. He may not be very powerful in Magecraft, but Waver has amassed quite a lot of influence in the decade since the Fourth Holy War. But before he can properly investigate the Fifth War, he needs to make

sure his going won't provoke the high-class Mages into taking excessive action.

Taiga: Ohhh, that's too bad. I'm sure he's become quite handsome since we last met... Now, for our last question! "Will the Patheon of Sonic Universes gods and their allies interfere?" by Loki's Tongue.

Illya: That's unlikely, as those guys are all the way in another dimension. But who knows how gods act? Maybe they've already decided to interfere by sending Sonic and company to our universe.

Taiga: And so, I hereby declare and end to this Q/A! We shall see you at the next practice!

Illya: Good bye, everyone! Next time, it'll be my time to shine!

Gilgamesh: No, it'll be mine.

Taiga & Illya: Ehheheh!?

Unknown From ME

Chapter 17: *Unknown From M.E.*

For Assassin, the night had not been all that bad. With the Master of Berserker on her way with Sonic and his allies, Caster had him moved from the Temple Gate to patrol the inner workings of her territory, with instructions to pick off anyone he came across. As such, he made sure to walk very slowly. Eventually, he found himself in the company of two beautiful ladies- a pity their personalities were not even half as interesting as their outfits! -armed with hi-tech weapons, clearly from another dimension (Or at least, from the set of a *Sentai* program). However, despite attempts to act diplomatically, the Einzbern maids were determined to fight him. Thankfully, Assassin's own skills were enough to keep their attacks at bay. And as he ducked, dodged, blocked, and weaved around their blows, the wandering samurai continued to make small talk. He could have slain them both in less than ten blows, or just escaped with Presence Concealment, but neither option appealed to him.

"Perhaps we could go see a movie," Assassin said as he blocked and redirected a blow from Leysritt's giant axe, "I don't mind paying for two lovely ladies," He ducked and spun away from a wire-bird Sella created at him. "Of course, we won't be able to buy snacks..."

But as distracted he was by Sella and Leysritt, his senses were still sharp enough for his ears could pick up the sound of mocking laughter. Assassin broke away from the maids as the three of them turned to the source of the sarcastic revelry. It was a man, but his entire body was draped in the shadows.

"Simply adorable. You mere *facsimiles* acting so energetic," the man said. Somehow, only his piercing red eyes were visible in the dark. "Perhaps you could be of use to me."

There was a pregnant pause as Assassin and the maids took in this newcomer. It was plain to see that whoever he was, he was not someone who held good intentions. However, his presence had a pressure that told them that making overt movements would be akin to walking up to a sleeping lion and kicking it while singing very loudly.

Unfortunately, the decision was taken out of their hands when a swirling vortex of golden light appeared behind the man. Its light was enough to illuminate the intruder's features, revealing his golden hair and golden armor.

"...But, no, there are simply too many players in this game as there is." Gilgamesh decided. Behind him, a golden light appeared.

Caster's vision was stymied by a barrage of twinkling stars and fluttering birdies that seemed to orbit her head. She had trouble thinking as her ears buzzed with a loud throbbing. As she pulled herself up, she tried to recall how she ended up half-buried in rubble.

"I...I was talking to Souichirou-sama, and then..." The memory returned, along with increased throbbing. That horrible, little red thug! How dare he strike a woman! And in front of her husband-to-be! She gasped as realization hit almost as hard as Knuckles's fist had. "Souichirou- *sama*! If Knuckles dares to hurt him-!"

With barely a thought (That hurt, actually), she blew away the rocks and stone covering her. Caster floated a mere foot in the air, preparing to teleport back to her Master and show Knuckles a thing or two. Before she could, though, she saw that she wasn't alone.

&Break&

Shirou had been the closest to whatever had crashed into the maze, and Tails, thanks to his flying ability, had been quick to catch up with him. As the two approached the crash site, the question as to what it was answered when her body flew up out of the rubble.

Caster happened to glance in their direction, and a nasty smile grew on her face. Both man and fox cringed.

"Well, well, well," She said with a slight lisp, "If it itn't the former Mathter of... why do I thound diff'rent?"

"Your, um, your mouth..." Shirou began awkwardly. He wasn't sure how to approach the subject. In fact, he felt that fighting a hundred Berserkers would be preferable to what he had to say.

"What about it?"

Tails, who had ducked down, said, "Well, ah, it s kinda missing...a tooth."

"...What? Slowly, Caster reached up towards her mouth.

"Yeah, the one in front..."

The ear-splitting shriek bounced off of the walls, and seemed to echo into infinity. Caster seemed to forget about the boys in front of her as she underwent a meltdown over her disfiguration. Desperately, she cast some low-level Magecraft to fix the injury.

I know most women are self-conscious about their image, but that seems a bit excessive... Shirou thought as he blocked his ears as best he could. The screeching seemed to echo in his ear drums without fading.

Once she was done, Caster pulled out a hand mirror to check herself out. Much to her satisfaction, the spell had filled the gap quite nicely, and made her teeth shine. *Thank God. I don t know what I d do if Souichirou-sama saw me like this-*

That was as far as Caster's train of thought when something orange and fluffy crashed into her stomach with all the force of a cannonball. As the witch went flying back into the rubble, Tails landed on the ground and yelled to Shirou, "Quick, put the pendent on her!"

Shirou nodded, already running towards where Caster had landed. However, he wasn't fast enough, and Caster had teleported to behind the pair. The witch was clearly livid, as evidenced by the vein visible on her forehead.

"You little brats!" Caster snarled, and thrust her hands out at Tails. From her palms shot a stream of purple energy. Tails did a cartwheel to avoid it, and in that motion easily fitted the cannon onto his arm. Meanwhile, the stream of power completely vaporized the wall behind him.

"Let s see how you like it!" Tails shouted, and fired a bolt of yellow, crackling power from the cannon s barrel.

Caster made a face and teleported higher into the air. The shot from Tails struck a pillar, causing it to crack and break apart.

Although Shirou had lectured Rin earlier about the effectiveness of technological advancements, he couldn't deny that there was a certain gap in the level of power the two held.

I suppose even if modern science can outdo modern Magecraft, it still has a ways to go before it can meet stuff from the Age of the Gods, Shirou thought, holding out his hands. But we've come too far to give up now!

Shirou projected a bow and arrow, and took aim at Caster. With a thought, he forced a bit more Prana into the arrow, so that it began to glow from overdose. When he released the bow, the arrow seemed to become a stream of light as it rocketed towards the witch. Of course, Caster saw it coming, and dismissed the projectile with an admittedly unnecessary but impressive wave of her hand.

"O-hohoho, please, Shirou- *kun* ," Caster chortled, "Your mediocre skills couldn't reach me even before I found the Emer-"

POW! That was the sound Tails foot made as he did an impressive roundhouse kick that collided with Caster's chin. For the briefest

moment, it appeared that his namesake appendages had stopped moving and the rest of his body spun in the air. Caught off guard, Caster went into a downward plunge. Seeing a chance, Shirou Projected Bakuya and Kanshou and ran to where Caster was going to land.

If we can kill Caster here, then this will end instantly! The young mage thought. He liked his chances. According to Rin, a human beating a Servant was possible in certain circumstances. And from what he had learned about the various Servant classes, in terms of physical ability the Caster was the weakest. If he moved fast enough, he would be able to end Caster's life before she could react!

But just as he was close enough to land a decisive blow, Caster's body vanished instantaneously. The witch reappeared several feet away, swaying slightly on her feet. It looked as if all those blows to the head were having their effect.

"Would you stop doing that!?" Caster yelled furiously at Tails. She shot another series of beams at the fox, who weaved between the streams as he had been dodging lasers his entire life. And given what kind of advanced weaponry Dr. Eggman had at his disposal, Tails just may have been.

But Shirou knew he couldn't simply watch the spectacle. While Tails had his experience to keep him going, he was still a mortal creature fighting a Servant, and one whose legend was written during the Age of the Gods. As foolish as it was to charge head-long at Caster, Shirou needed to draw her attention from Tails, if only for a moment. Pulling back, he flung his swords at Caster. Seeing the attack out of the corner of her eye, Caster easily dodged the pair of swords by floating juuust out of the way, and they seem to fly off out of sight. As Caster turned her full attention onto Shirou, the young Mage had already Projected a second pair of swords, continuing his charge. As he did, he could sense the pull.

The true power of Kanshou and Bakuya lay in the bond they held- one sword will always return to the other- even if they were

Projections. The pair of swords in the air sensed the presence of a second pair, and two halves began to fly back to their counterparts. And Caster's back was now in their flight path!

But it wasn't going to be that easy, apparently. Just before the swords in motion reached Caster, the witch spun about and dispelled the swords coming at from behind in an instant. Seeing an opportunity, Shirou Reinforced his arms and threw his remaining swords at Caster, and then Reinforced his legs to speed up. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Caster was already turning back around to dispell the second pair of swords-

POW!

-Which made her vulnerable to Tails slamming into her back, sending the witch flying forward. And just as she righted herself, Shirou struck Caster with a powerful clothesline, knocking her into the ground. But just as quickly as she landed, Caster teleported up high into the air, well out of both men s immediate grasp. Even with the distance, Shirou and Tails could see the blood in her eyes.

" *Machia Hecatia Graea!* "

The entire area became a downpour of light as deadly beams of Magecraft rained down. Realizing that there were too many to dodge, even for someone as fast as Tails, Shirou ran over to the fox and held up his arm.

" *Rho Aias!*"

The same mystical shield Archer created when Eggman s robot attacked his neighborhood appeared over Shirou s hand, becoming a phantasmal umbrella that protected them from Caster s attack. However, the sheer force of the beams shook the shield, and Shirou knew that it wouldn t be long before it broke. Under his knees, Tails fiddled with the arm cannon s wiring before pointing it up at Caster.

"Shirou, when I give the signal, undo your shield!" The sneaker-wearing fox said, "...Now!"

Shirou released the spell, although he didn't know why. But Tails sounded like he knew what he was doing, and he did have experience fighting witches. All he could do was have faith, and watch as a dozen beams of certain death converged on their location. But as they did, Tails fired his arm cannon. Instead of the solid bolt of power from before, the barrel released a stream of vibrating waves that almost looked like yellow circles. They struck Caster dead-on, but instead of knocking her out of the air, they wave-stream caused the witch to convulse erratically, and the Prana-beams she was firing ceased.

"I modified the cannon's particle-release function into a condensed disruptor field," Tails explained quickly, "It negatively affected the energy her body is made of and shorted out her spells. But it won't last long! Let's get her!"

Nodding, Shirou Projected a bow and arrow. Taking aim, he fired, but before it even reached her, the arrow suddenly looped around and flew back at the pair! Tails and Shirou darted aside to avoid being struck as the arrow impaled the rock floor.

Argh! This is ridiculous! Are we ever going to beat her!? Shirou thought, *Maybe we're going about this the wrong way...*

He glared up back at Caster, which is when he felt his entire body going numb. Much to his horror he realized that there was another presence *inside* of his being- one that was a short distance away.

Get him. Caster's voice echoed through his mind, and Shirou found himself moving.

"Shirou? What are you doing?" Tails asked worriedly as Shirou suddenly stepped between him and Caster. When Shirou lunged, Tails jumped into the air and began to fly just out of reach. Taking out the putting on his goggles, Tails did a quick scan of the human and

saw that a great deal with Caster's Prana was now inside of Shirou's body. "Oh my gosh!"

"Two against one..." Caster mused in a mock-thoughtful tone, "It's so much fun when you're the one, is it?"

With that said, Caster unleashed another volley of beams at the pair. In spite of the overwhelming odds against it happening, none of the beams struck either of the boys, although Tails had to tackle Shirou out of the way of one stream that had been on a direct path to his neck.

I- I have to fight it... Shirou thought frantically as his body chased Tails all over the area. But he couldn't. Caster's hold was too strong.

Desperate, Shirou decided to focus all of his will on one foot. At the very least, he would be able to slow himself down if only minutely. It must have worked, as Shirou began to feel that foot begin to go numb and he began to lose his balance. As he did, Tails once again tackled into him. Shirou's arms moved to strangle the little fox, but as they did, Tails pressed something into his palm. As he did, Shirou actually felt Caster's hold weaken before it vanished completely. Feeling invigorated, Shirou tried to manipulate his Prana, only to find himself unable to do so. Looking into his hand, he saw that Tails had forced him to wear one of the Ring Pendants Rin made from Power Rings- the pendant shield him from Caster's spell, but also negated his own Magecraft as well.

"Wha- how did you do that?!" Caster shouted, upset. She put her glowing hands together, clearly intent on pouring more influence into Shirou.

Tails wasn't going to let that happen so easily. Tossing Shirou his arm cannon, he built up speed with a Spin Dash and launched himself at Caster. With her focus on Shirou, the witch had been caught off-guard and knocked off of her feet. Meanwhile, Shirou fired several rounds from the arm cannon, successfully hitting her in the legs, arms and left shoulder.

" *Eyagh!* " Caster shrieked in pain before losing her cool. "Enough!"

The wounds on her body began to heal, and her entire being seemed to glow. Scanning her, Tails saw the problem and shouted, "Shirou! She's using the Chaos Emerald to heal herself!"

Caster cackled victoriously, That's right, you little fools! As long as I have the Emerald to power my Magecraft, my powers will have no limit! All you're doing is drawing out the inevitable!"

Flying back to Shirou, Tails whispered, "Shirou, I have an idea. If we can cut off her Prana flow, we can beat her. It's risky, but I'll need your pendent to put on her."

"You'll never get close enough to do it, she'll just teleport away," Shirou whispered back, and an idea began to form in his mind. "We need to distract her...think you can hold out on your own for a minute?"

Tails nodded, and turned to face Caster. Spinning his tails, the fox charged at the witch, who responded with another slew of purple beams. While they danced around each other in battle, Shirou reached into his jacket. He felt the Thompson Contender. He had two Origin Bullets, but only one chance. He couldn't let anything go to waste.

After making sure that the pendant was securely fastened around his wrist, Shirou took off the arm cannon to load one of the Origin Bullets into the Contender. Once that was done, he checked the cannon's energy levels; If he turned the power to maximum, he had enough for one last shot. Turning the dial up, Shirou fitted the cannon back on and held the Contender in his other hand.

Meanwhile, Tails managed to land another hit into Caster's stomach, causing the witch to teleport away to another area.

"You can't keep this up forever!" Tails shouted at the witch, "You can brag about drawing the Emerald s power as much as you want, but

our research shows that the Chaos energy damages the user's body in this dimension! Either we beat you or you burn yourself out-literally!"

Caster gave Tails an angry look, and waved her hand. The minute she did, a pair of large skeleton hands burst from the ground and nearly crushed Tails in their grip. Tails managed to jump out of the way, but before he landed back on the floor, more skeleton hands appeared! Tails flew into the air, but he immediately drifted back to the floor. Dragon Tooth Warriors surrounded him, but Tails Spindashed his way out. However, he was clearly panting.

Caster grinned evilly. "Oh, I don't think I'm the only one feeling the burn."

FWOOM!

Caster howled in pain as the energy missile struck her directly in the chest. As she magically healed herself, the witch glared at where the beam had come from. At the end of her heated stare was Shirou, or more specifically, the gun barrel he pointed was pointing at her wound. Caster's lips began to move just as Shirou pulled the trigger. The gunshot echoed throughout the chamber just as a trio of Dragon Tooth Warriors burst from the ground and tackled Shirou. Caster did not bother to move. As far as she was concerned, the pistol in Shirou's hand was just that, a gun. A mundane weapon built in, and to be used for, an era with only the bare-bones of Magecraft available. The body of a Servant, being composed of Prana, cannot be damaged by a mere bullet, even if that Servant belongs to the Caster-class.

But the ammunition of the Emiya Thompson Contender was no mere bullet. It was a counter for those who defended themselves with Magecraft. It was the destruction of Magecraft.

When the bullet hit her body, Caster's eyes widened. She unleashed a howl of pain that was cut short as her body fell to the floor. She curled up into a ball, shivering as she bled. As she did, the Dragon

Tooth Warriors fell to pieces, clattering as they went. Seeing Caster beaten, Shirou ran up, but hesitated before he got too close. He wasn't sure if approaching the witch would be a good idea.

Tails clearly had no issues, flying up to Caster's prone form. He hovered around her, literally, before waving Shirou over. "She's out cold. Pass me your pendant." Shirou did so. As Tails tied it to Caster, making sure that it was pressing against the skin, he asked, "What the heck happened? You shot her- I thought Servants couldn't be hurt by weapons from this universe."

Shirou held out the Contender for Tails to see. "This gun is special- or at least, the bullets are. According to my father's notes, the shots are designed to destroy the target's ability to use Magecraft."

Tails looked down at Caster. "So, now she's...?"

Shirou nodded. "Yeah...a being created from Magecraft, now unable to use Magecraft. A total contradiction..."

With the battle over, exhaustion took them both. Tails and Shirou soon found themselves hitting down on floor as their legs went into what is known as Stand-by Mode.

"It was a long shot, really," Shirou admitted, "But I'm glad it worked out."

Tails nodded, grinning. "That's one down, anyway. We're on the right track...!"

But for Shirou, there was still one thing to do. Holding out his hand, he Projected a copy of Rulebreaker into existence. He stabbed it as hard as he could into the witch.

Sonic leapt over a wall roughly Shirou's height that had been erected in the path, positioned there for no apparent reason that to irritate whoever would be navigating the treacherous labyrinth. Thanks to

his momentum, the Hedgehog's airtime lasted for a solid 6.47 seconds. As he landed, curiosity nudged Sonic's brain and he looked back. On the other side of the bothersome barrier was a pit, and judging from the glinting from within, there were spikes at the bottom. Had a normal person tried jumping it, they might have found that instead of light, there were sharp points at the end of the tunnel.

Currently, Sonic was on his way to see what had rocketed into the maze with speed and impact of a meteorite. It was difficult to tell if he was on the right track, with so many twists and turns, but so far Sonic hadn't seen any signs that was going in circles, so he felt optimistic about his path.

That optimism turned to concern (and mild irritation) as he heard the tale-tell whoosh of something flying through the air.

Towards him.

Sonic immediately hit the breaks, and then jumped high into the air. The ground he had been standing on exploded as if struck by a ballistic missile. While in mid-air, Sonic looked around for the source of the attack. He soon saw it, standing on one of the high walls a fair distance away. Even in the uneven light of the maze, Sonic could make out the red longboat and white hair.

Archer.

Sonic took off running again, and good thing, too, as Archer had fired another shot at him. Years of dodging projectiles with motion-tracking capabilities allowed Sonic to evade the attacks. It was just a matter of consistently and erratically altering his rate of speed, stopping and running at opportune moments, and jumping at just the right time. Although there were a few close-calls, Sonic was successful at avoiding...

Crash! "Ugh!"

Most of Archers attacks.

Rings rained the ground as Sonic groggily pulled himself up. Even with the protection of Power Rings, the shot hurt. Shaking him out of it, Sonic dove to snatch at least one Ring before they all vanished completely. As he rolled onto his feet, Sonic saw a line of three Rings floating in the air and quickly snagged them.

Why are there Rings outside of a Special Zone? He thought, Is Caster tossing around so much Chaos power that her lair is becoming a Special Zone?

Sonic wasn't able to think more on the subject, as Archer was shooting more swords at him. Once more on the run, Sonic realized that unless measures were taken, Archer would get bored with missing and change to a target that couldn't dodge at the speed of sound. Archer needed to go down, but Sonic doubted that he could reach the bowman from the maze in good time. He would have to make the Servant come to him.

Jumping over an explosion, Sonic yelled, "What's the matter, Archie? Too afraid to face me head-on? Worried I'll muss that pretty white hair?" Sliding under between the legs of a Dragon Tooth Warrior (Which exploded spectacularly), Sonic tried a new tack. "Or, do you know that If we did fight, I'd kick your sorry butt around the curb?"

And just like that, the onslaught stopped. Sonic looked over to where Archer had been. He wasn't there anymore. Still keeping a wary eye out, Sonic continued to run, but soon found Archer waiting for him in an wide area.

"Then Let's go," Archer said. His voice was soft, but there was a hardness to his tone. "Why don't we see which of us is the better hero?"

Archer held out his hands, and said, "*I am the bone of my sword.*"

As the two swords appeared in his hands (Hmm, they looked kinda like the ones Shirou summoned) Sonic was already charging at Archer, completely at full throttle. Archer brought his twin blades

ready, Kanshou to cut into Sonic, and Bayakuya to catch into the Hedgehog when he inevitably dodge. But before he was in striking distance, Sonic suddenly dug his heels into the ground. The ear-piercing screech of his soles grinding against the ground was nowhere as painful as the gravel and debris that was kicked up by the sudden reverse in inertia and flew into Archer's eyes. Blinded, Archer instinctively threw a sword into the cloud. When he didn't hear another cry of pain, Archer knew he missed and was already turning to intercept Sonic.

He's going around me! Archer thought, but to his initial confusion he didn't see the Hedgehog. The confusion didn't last long as he felt some sharp and spinning slam into his back. *Argh! He kept going behind me even as I turned around!*

Archer used his momentum to roll into a somersault, throwing his other sword back at Sonic. Sonic jumped into the air to avoid the attack, and at the apex of his ascent launched himself at Archer in a Homing Shot. Archer Projected *Rhio Aias* to block the assault, and Sonic's spinning body slammed into it harmlessly. As Sonic fell to the ground, Archer dispelled the shield and chopped down with his swords. Before they could connect, Sonic used a second Homing Shot to launch himself away from the Servant.

From around the corner, Illya watched as the two heroes traded blows and raced around each other. She had stumbled upon them while navigating the maze and trying to catch up with her maids. When she saw that Sonic was going to fight Archer, she had considered calling Berserker to help out. Sonic may have had his speed, as far as she could see, had spent every encounter with a Servant running away. As risky as it would have been pulling Berserker away from his skirmish with Saber, it was better in the long run to remove Tohsakah's treacherous former Servant from the War once the opportunity arose. Once Caster and Eggman were eliminated, they would all be enemies again.

But to her surprise, Sonic was not only matching the bowman, but seemed to be out doing him! Granted, Archer seemed to have the

worst stats of any Servant in the War, even compared to Saber, bound to her half-trained stepbrother. But even with that, the bowman always seemed in control during every battle. Now, against Sonic, he wasn't.

For some reason, Illya had mixed feelings about that. She contemplated sending some wire constructs out to help Sonic- maybe distract Archer a bit and give the Hedgehog an opening to exploit -when she heard noises from behind. Whirling about, Illya found herself face to face with a pair of eyes that were painted on. And above them was a pointed noise that spun like a mining drill.

Illya instinctively let loose a burst of Prana that tore the Burrowbot to pieces. Out from the wreckage came a cute lil fox cub. A normal one, not anthropomorphic like Tails. Illya watched as it scampered away, and as such was completely caught off guard when a second robot, one built to resemble a bat, slammed into her head with the airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow. Suffering the second worst concussion since the War's beginning, Illya went down.

Meanwhile, Sonic and Archer continued their not-so-merry dance as they dueled. By that point Archer had gotten used to Sonic's methods and was beginning to adapt, forcing Sonic onto a more defensive battle-strategy. Archer ceased attempting close-minded combat and kept his distance, firing at Sonic his Projected swords.

"You seem to enjoy being a hero," Archer said, gritting his teeth. "I've heard you telling Shirou about your glorious exploits."

"What can I say? I love living dangerously!" Sonic yelled as he zigged and zagged between shots. "And there's nothing wrong with helping people, am I right?"

Oh, hearing those words struck at Archer's core. They struck him more than witnessing his old foolishness in Shirou had. Because from Sonic, those words were more than a coping mechanism. A desperate justification. And it was a reminder of where those ideals have led him.

"And the fame and fortune it nets you must certainly help, doesn't it?" Archer was secretly surprised at the growl that accompanied this question. Was he losing control?

"Fame, yeah, but fortune..." Sonic cocked his head before jumping over a shot that destroyed the wall behind him. "Someone's making a fortune, but it ain't me."

Sonic couldn't help but notice that Archer was becoming predictable. Before, he would avoid an obvious pattern, sometimes targeting Sonic directly, and sometimes he would fire indiscriminately to shake up Sonic and lure him into a better sniping position. Now, though, Archer was just making direct assaults.

Maybe I can fool him... Sonic thought, and stopped dead in his tracks. He turned and looked directly at Archer. He spread out his arms, the obvious No Funny Tricks Here pose. Currently, there was a clear path between the two of them. It was risky, but Sonic decided to run the gauntlet, dodging mystical bullets as they came head on.

But Archer didn't take the bait. Instead, he called out, "And what would you do, if that world you fought for, turned on you?" Was that bitterness in his voice? "If, even though you worked tirelessly to save lives, you were tried for a crime you didn't commit? If only so some twisted sense of justice could be fulfilled?"

To this, Sonic just put his hands behind the back of his head. "Same thing I did last time it happened," He grinned, "Launch the most daring jailbreak with the help of my friends!"

Sonic began to run. However, he didn't move. He remained in one place as his legs became a blur. If observed from the side, the hypothetical viewer would have noted that the motion made it look like Sonic's legs had been replaced an 8 on its side. Then, he shot forward in a burst of speed. As Sonic ran, Archer proceeded to shot more swords. But Sonic just swerved to avoid these attacks. Unlike his normal Spin Dash, the "Figure 8 Peel Out" allowed him to build up a charge without sacrificing visual contact. While he couldn't plow

through certain obstacles unless he was curled up, being able to see and control your direction made up for it.

Seeing that Sonic would soon collide with him, Archer held out his hands to Project the *Rhio Aias* . But then his eyes widened. Instead, he fired a Projected sword. Sonic easily ducked under it, going into Spinball mode. He slammed into Archer's chest, knocking the bowman down. The two tumbled over each other, but once their momentum ceased, Sonic was standing on Archer, his right heel pressed firmly against the Servant's throat. All Sonic has to do stomp down and Archer would die.

But Sonic realized that Archer was not paying attention to him or his foot. His eyes seemed to be focused on something behind Sonic...

Feeling a bit apprehensive, Sonic turned his head. He could see a pile of scrap metal a short distance away, with a squirrel scampering off. And lying next to it was...

"Illya!" Sonic gasped, and took off towards the girl. Just as Archer was beginning to push himself up, Sonic was back by his side, and wrapped one of the pendants around his wrist. Then Sonic rushed to Illya's side. A quick inspection showed that, aside from the bump on her head, the little Master was unharmed. But something had destroyed the Badniks...

Sonic remembered the shot that missed and suddenly understood. Picking Illya up in his arms, he walked over to Archer, who was still sitting on the floor.

"You saved Illya," Sonic stated, "You saw that she was being carted off and destroyed her kidnapper. Why?"

Archer didn't say anything. Instead, he was looking at some kind of red jewel in his hand. It looked vaguely familiar to Sonic, but he couldn't recall where. Of course, that didn't matter right now.

With a sigh, Sonic reached over and took the pendent off of Archer. He was about to run off when Archer spoke up.

"I'll taker her."

Sonic looked up into Archer s eyes. The bowman was now standing over him, (a natural consequence of their difference in heights), but there was an near-emptiness in his eyes. Whatever fire and intensity they used to have was almost smothered. But it wasn't gone completely.

With a sigh, Sonic just took off. Whatever side Archer was supposed to be on, he wasn't in the right state to hold anyone, much less children. He called out over his shoulder, "If you wanna help, try using those eagle-eyes to find Knuckles! Who knows what he's gotten himself into!"

As they fought, Knuckles was forced to realize something; Kuzuki Souichirou was good. The man wasn t just a skilled fighter, but relentless and utterly hardcore. As strong as he was, it had been a while since Knuckles had fought with another serious martial artist. Furthermore, Kuzuki had the longer reach. Much to his frustration, Knuckles had found himself on the defensive. Even worse, Souichirou had what was probably the most annoying fighting style, one made specifically to target openings and cause sneak attacks.

Whack!

Knuckles grunted in pain as the school teacher's chop struck his neck. The blow had enough force to be fatal, but the Power Rings shielded Knuckles body from serious injury. Knuckles went down, but not out. As he scooped up the Rings before they vanished, Knuckles slammed his fist into Souichiro s ankle, and then followed up with an uppercut as the man fell. To his credit, Souichirou recovered quickly and was already sweeping his leg in response. Knuckles jumped away to avoid the kick and put his own dukes up in readiness. Souichirou had taken his own fighting pose.

An idea came to Knuckles, and he crouched down. Entering a Spin Dash, he built up speed and then charged at Souichirou. The Master, having anticipated this, was all too prepared and easily jumped aside. Knuckles sped past Souichirou in a rush of red, but instead of a crash, nothing followed. Souichirou turned around and behind saw empty air. Knuckles had thrown himself off of the edge!

He ran away? Souichirou thought, and stared into the expanse below, hoping to see a glimpse of anything red. He could see scuffles all around as the intruders and Caster's own army waged war, but no sign of- *Wait, what's that yellow-*

Souichirou's thoughts were cut off when something rammed into his back. He felt two pairs of spikes dig into his body, and realized that somehow, Knuckles had gotten around and tackled him. This wouldn't have been so bad, except Souichirou had been standing on a ledge. As gravity proved to be a harsh mistress, the former assassin struggled to push Knuckles away from his body. Succeeding with a solid punch, Souichirou did an amazing series of flips as he righted himself in the air, somersaulting off of a tower and making a three-point landing on the floor. A quick examination of his surroundings told Souichirou that Knuckles was nowhere around. Which was odd.

Did he land in another part of the- Wait, what's that in the air? Souichirou squinted, wishing that Caster had put Reinforcement spells over his eyes as she had his hands.

Unbelievably, it was Knuckles! The Echidna was flying- or rather, falling with style- down at Souichirou with an expression that was too much like Sonic's.

The teacher readied himself to strike. From the looks of things, Knuckles was on a direct course for him. But as the Echidna got within hitting range, he curved and flew off to the left, narrowly missing the blow. Just as Souichirou turned his head to keep Knuckles in his vision, he felt a powerful kick to the side. Knuckles had rebounded off of a wall to attack Souichirou. As he recovered,

Souichirou tried to nail Knuckles with an elbow jab, but Knuckles ducked under it (Easy to do with his height) and slammed Souichirou's chest with a jab of his own...only his had two spikes at the end.

Souichirou went flying, and just barely righted himself before landing. He felt his injured area and learned that as painful as that punch had been, the spikes on it hadn't pierced his flesh. Either Caster's enhancements had increased his durability more than they had thought, or Knuckles dulled his fists. But there was no time to think about it, as Knuckles was running up. Souichirou readied himself, but just as before, the minute Knuckles got within range, the Echidna would suddenly change course, this time jumping up into the air well above Souichirou's head. As the teacher looked up to keep Knuckles in sight, Knuckles suddenly swooped down, once more tackling the Master to the ground and slugging him in the jaw. Before he could do more, several of Caster's Dragon Tooth Warriors rose out of the ground and pulled Knuckles off. They didn't last long, but it was enough time for Souichirou to rethink his options,

I'm at a disadvantage, Souichirou realized as he wiped some blood from his chin, Not only is Knuckles starting to understand my style, but the larger area gives him more room to maneuver. Maybe I should summon Caster to help...

A clanking from behind interrupted Souichirou's thoughts. Turning his head, he saw what seemed like a gigantic, robot worm slink towards him from around a corner. Its body was made up of several spheres connected together in a line, with a rather cartoonish head in front. Upon seeing Souichiro, the Caterkiller reared up and prepared to attack. Not one to let an opportunity slip away, Souichiro thrust his palm forward. Upon contact, the head of the Badnik shattered in a small explosion. As a small rabbit hopped out from the wreckage, the other sections of the Caterkiller's body disconnected and sprang apart in multiple directions. One bounced off of a wall, and nearly struck Souichirou's shoulder.

Robots... Souichirou thought, Shirou's group must have left the door open and they walked right in. They must be looking for the Emerald.

Before Souichirou could mentally contact Caster and warn her, something small hit his back. It was a femur. Looking back, Souichirou saw a certain red figure charging at him, waving what used to be a spine and ribcage like a flag.

We're not done yet! He yelled, and curled up into a Spin Dash. He shot towards Souichirou with the speed and force of a cannonball. The Master prepared to counter, but before Knuckles had closed the gap halfway, the Echidna sprang into the air, leaping over Souichirou as a spinning ball. Souichirou whirled around to keep Knuckles in sight, but saw no one there. Knuckles had begun to glide, and was circling around in the air. But as soon as Knuckles was right above Souichirou, he dropped down and slammed his opponent into the stone floor. Souichirou tried to push Knuckles off, but the Echidna was relentless. Refusing to give his opponent a chance, Knuckles raised his fist, but before he could throw the punch, Souichirou landed a chop on his neck. Rings fell as Knuckles was knocked off of Souichirou's body and tumbled into a wall. Knuckles pulled himself up just in time to see Souichirou charging into him. Feeling a little dizzy, Knuckles felt around for something to steady himself. It felt like a metal ball. A flash of inspiration cleared his mind, and Knuckles flung the piece of Caterkiller at the approaching assassin. Souichirou easily dodged it, but that brief detour was all the delay Knuckles needed. Immediately after he had thrown the Badnik piece, Knuckles was already getting up and had begun climbing up the wall, leaving Souichirou to almost run into it. Caster's Master glared up at the Echidna, trying to determine what Knuckles was up to. As Knuckles went over the wall, Souichirou briefly considered chasing after him, but dismissed it. If Knuckles was going to run away, then it was not his problem.

I should contact Caster and see how she's doing- What's that?

Souichirou became aware that the wall he had almost run into- that Knuckles had climbed over- was starting to shake. His eyes widened

as a crazy notion struck him, and he jumped back.

But not far enough, and not quickly enough. The wall came down in pieces, battering Souichirou and knocking him away. Knuckles stood proudly on the other side, fists up and wearing a "I Just Punched A Wall Down" smirk on his face. He had retreated to use the structure as a weapon!

As Souichirou pulled himself up, Knuckles was already in motion. The Echidna charged at the Master, rubbing his fists together at an incredible speed. Once close enough, Knuckles, once close enough, threw a punch which Souichirou managed to catch.

Bzzt!

Souichirou reeled back in pain as a jolt ran through his palm. Knuckles had built up a static charge in his gloves, enhancing the strength of the punch. Knuckles followed up with an uppercut that knocked Souichirou off of his feet. The Master tried to right himself in the air so he could land on his feet, but Knuckles had other plans. He grabbed Souichirou by the ankles and began to swing him around. Faster and faster, the Echidna spun around on his heels. Once he felt he had built up enough speed, Knuckles released his foe as he would in an Olympic Hammer Throw. Souichirou flew through the air, but managed to flip himself so that he landed feet first against another wall. As he landed back on the ground, Souichirou saw the Echidna charging at him and prepared to strike at his opponent. Of course, his stance was not as firm as it normally was, swaying a bit. He had been an assassin, and in that lifestyle, fights did not last long. This extended conflict was wearing him down.

This next exchange will end it, Souichirou decided in his mind, I 'l use two strikes- one to make him drop his Rings, and the second to end him.

As the distance closed, Souichirou saw that Knuckles was holding something in his hands- two more segments of Caterkiller's body. Knuckles leapt into the air and threw the pieces at Souichirou, one

after another. The Master dodged them easily, and the robot parts crashed into the ground harmlessly. As Souichirou prepared himself to engage Knuckles, his mind was only partially aware of a gunshot in the distance, mostly covered up by the sound of the metal hitting the ground at the same time.

Knuckles landed back on the ground and was soon close enough. Souichirou shot his fist out and struck Knuckles right in his solar plexus.

Something cracked, but it wasn't Knuckles. The Echidna rubbed his chest in confusion, before glaring at his opponent. Souichirou fell to his knees, clutching his hands. Pain was coursing through his body, all coming from his wrists.

The runes...Caster's runes have undone themselves! Souichirou realized in horror. He quickly tried to telepathically call his Servant. *Caster, are you all right?!*

The reply was instantaneous, and apparently she was in as much pain as he was. *He...he shot me! That little brat shot me! Bullets aren't supposed to hurt, but this& argh, it s like I m melting!*

Souichirou didn't understand. Shot? Bullets? Modern weapons, or even mortal weapons in general, couldn't affect Servants. What was going on?!

Before Souichirou could figure out the mystery, rapid footsteps brought his mind back to the present.

POW!

...But not in time to avoid being slugged in the gut by Knuckles left jab. Souichirou buckled down, which brought his chin low enough to receive an uppercut from Knuckles. Souichirou went flying, but instead of flipping about so he could land on his feet, fell flat on his back. Knuckles prepared himself for the inevitable counterattack& but it never came. Souichirou just lied there. Curious, Knuckles

stepped over and looked close. While they were still open, Souichirou's eyes, once sharp and full of fire, now appeared glazed and unfocused. He looked very much like a doll on a shelf& after the family dog had been chewing on it. Knuckles began to feel a little uncomfortable, so he reached into Souichirou's coat pocket and retrieved the man's glasses. Wonders never cease, the eyewear were undamaged by the fight. Knuckles reached over and gently pulled Souichirou's eyelids down, and then placed the glasses over the eyes.

With that battle apparently over, Knuckles leaned against a wall as he caught his breath. He took a moment to wipe his brow.

"Now, what next...?" He muttered in thought. A large crash in the distance caught his attention.

What next?

That question was also on Rin's mind, although the context may have been different. It was truly an irony. Out of all of the Masters in the alliance- And she was still a Master, even if her Servant deserted her, no matter what Illya said- she was the closest one to stealing Caster's Chaos Emerald. The problem was that she was also the closest to Saber and Berserker's duel! While the prudent thing would be to ignore the battle and try to get to the Emerald- Steal it, and Caster wouldn't be able to draw its energies anymore. But unfortunately, actually doing that would be problematic. As focused as she was fighting Berserker, Rin couldn't take the chance that Saber wouldn't notice anyone trying to get near the Chaos Emerald. Even with Reinforced legs, there was no way Rin could reach the Emerald before Saber intercepted (And such an act would result in being sliced in half- vertically) her.

But remaining put, hiding just out of sight, wasn't in the cards either. Even with the cacophony of Saber and Berserker fighting, Rin could hear noises from all over the maze- the rest of the group was fighting for their lives. There was no doubt that Caster herself wouldn't get

involved as well. As long as she had the Chaos Emerald to bolster her spells, Caster would be almost untouchable.

Think, Rin. You can't get near the Emerald, but you can't leave it be. How can we change the situation for the better?

Rin Reinforced her eyes and did her best to scrutinize the place where the Emerald was. The jewel was floating on a pedestal, which had at least five different runes circles traced around it. These circles were arranged so that they formed a makeshift star. Rin could see the light emanating from the Emerald, and it was being pulled down into the runes. She surmised that this was Caster's method of drawing energy from the Emerald, while cutting down on the risk of damaging herself from the Emerald's potency. Mixing it with Fuyuki's normal leylines evened out some of the disruptive energies.

Of course, none of this matters if I can't get to it. Rin thought bitterly.

As Rin pondered the situation some more, outside forces were working to provoke a decision. As she glared at the glowing gem, Rin noticed that the ground around the runes were starting to crack and break apart. Then, several robots burst out from the floor! The Burrowbots surrounded the Emerald, each one intent on being the first to grab it.

Rin didn't even blink. She pointed and unleashed three *Gandre*, shattering the robots instantly. It was after the cute little birdy, squirrel, and piggie flew and scampered away from the wreckage that the full implications of what had happened sunk into Rin's mind.

Eggman's robots! How did they get into the maze!? Rin palmed her face in realization. *Because we left the door open, duh.*

Rin glanced back at the duel between Berserker and Saber. At that point, Saber had leapt onto Berserker's wrist and flipped over his head, slashing at his throat. Thankfully, Berserker was already immune to the Saber's sword, but the force of her slash actually made him pause. Immortal and invulnerable or not, being hit in the

neck still hurt. However, that just made him angrier, and his response- while it missed the intended target- knocked down several walls like dominos.

Rin looked back to the Emerald, and sure enough, more robots were approaching it. She couldn't waste her remaining gems picking them off. It was time for desperate measures. Taking the pendant she had, Rin opened the jewel and took the Power Ring out. As risky as it was, she would have to gamble on the Ring's physical protection keeping her alive when Saber inevitably intercepted her.

I am the Master of the Tohsaka Clan, Rin told herself, preparing to sprint. For a chance to obtain the Holy Grail, I would gladly give my life.

Reinforcing her legs, Rin burst into a run. She did not bother looking to see if Saber had noticed her. All she could do was focus on the Emerald. If she could remove Caster's source of power, that might be the deciding factor.

Unsurprisingly, the minute Rin crossed threshold and entered the area where the Emerald was, Saber broke away from her fight with Berserker, kicking him in the neck for good measure. Rather than unleash a flying slash that could potentially strike gem- even the weakest force might break the Emerald, and who knew what that might result in- she charged at Rin in order to deliver a drop kick that could not just break bones, but also rupture the organs so badly that the force would cause them to explode from out the other side of the body.

Thankfully, this terminal effect was blocked, thanks to the Power Ring. Instead of becoming several pieces of a bloody corpse, Rin simply went flying. It still hurt, of course, but compared to the burning sensation of trying to channel a Chaos Emerald's energy, it was...comparably less so.

As a golden loop fell to the ground and faded away, Rin rocketed away. By a smallest of chances, her trajectory was directly in line with

the Emerald. Rin crashed into jewel, pulling it out of its rune-circle. And by Reinforcing her body, she was able to shatter the other robots as well. Still hurt, and more bruised than she wanted to be, Rin nonetheless managed to catch herself land on her feet. Shivering from the experience (And pain) Rin held up her prize to get a better look at it. It was a beautiful piece of work, expertly cut as if made by the (other) world s best jeweler. It was precisely the same shape as the yellow Emerald Shirou had found.

"R...Rin?"

Saber s voice brought Rin out of her stupor. The lady knight had a tired look in her eyes, to go with the rest of her body. Although she still held her sword, she seemed to be struggle just to hold it. Either Caster had been neutralized, or taking the Emerald out of its place, thereby cutting off the power, had woken Saber up. Her armor gown dissolved, leaving Saber in a white two piece.

"What happened?" Saber asked, looking around cautiously.

Rin was about to bring Saber up to speed when a furious bellow interrupted here. Directly behind Saber, with his stone sword raised to cause serious harm. Saber whirled around and just barely dodged being cut in twain by ancient Greek anger. The force propelled her towards Rin, and it was a testament to her grace and skill that she only tumbled once before rolling into a lurching run.

Rin realized that something had happened to Illya if she wasn't restraining her pet monster. Or the little demon child was pulling a double cross. Both were possible, really. Rin activated her communicator, entering the party line.

"If anyone s close to Illya, get her to stop Berserker!" She shouted, "Saber's back to herself, but she's going to die if we don't do something!"

There was a babble of voices on the other end, before Sonic s reply came in clear.

" *Comin at ya.* "

That was not the tactical assistance Rin wanted to hear. Especially since Berserker was still on Saber's tail, Saber was still hindered by her exhaustion, and Saber...was running towards Rin!

Rin knew she had to act. She Reinforced her legs and charged at Saber. When they met, both girls dove to the side, just in time to avoid being obliterated as he charged. They were lucky, but the luck wasn't going to last. Already Berserker had crashed into a wall, and preparing for another charge.

"Rin, let's go..." Saber gasped, "Shirou will be upset if I let you die..."

The Tohsaka Mage was aghast. Saber was winded, on the verge of either passing out or fading away (The latter, most likely), and her first instinct was trying to help Rin get away. If anything, Rin needed to do the saving.

But Rin had nothing that could stop Berserker. And Saber was in no shape to help. They were going to die, unless a miracle happened.

And then it did.

Something fast, something sudden, something blue zipped in from the entrance of the area. It put itself between the girls and Berserker, causing a slight screech. The minute it did, Berserker came to a stop so sudden that he tore a large gash in the floor from the force. When the dust cleared, Berserker was frozen in a mid-swing, his stone sword raised, but on its way down. Eyes burning red glared down at the obstacle that appeared between them.

It was Sonic. And in his arms was Illya, who only now seemed to be waking up. There was a lump on her forehead.

Illya groaned, pulling herself out of Sonic's grip. "Wha...what happened? Berserker? Why is it always the head..."

With the presence of his Master, Berserker calmed- (No, not calm. He could never be calm)- or rather, ceased to be overtly menacing. He reached down and took Illya from Sonic, letting her sit on his shoulder.

With that task complete, Sonic turned and gave the two girls a cheeky grin. "So, how's it goin' on your end?"

It didn't take long for everyone to get back together. With Caster beaten, her Mage Circuits horribly splintered, her Dragon Tooth Warriors became naught but piles of bones, scattered every which way. They reunited in the center, like Sonic had said. Tails and Shirou had come next, the young Mage carrying Caster over his shoulders. And finally, Knuckles appeared, dragging Kazuki's unconscious body by the collar of his shirt. Both of the defeated enemies were laid down next to each other.

For Shirou, reuniting with Saber was a dream and a great relief. He was so glad to see her that he almost didn't notice the clothes she borrowed from Rin had been replaced by something a bit more revealing. Almost. And Sonic's wisecracking didn't help.

"Saber!" Sonic wagged a finger in mock disapproval. "What are you wearing, young lady?"

The Servant went "Eep!" and crossed her arms in humiliation. Being exhausted from her ordeal, Saber couldn't materialize her typical armor to cover herself up. Her cheeks feeling warm from the lovely sight, Shirou, somewhat regrettably, gave up his own coat for Saber to wear.

"It's good to have you back, Saber." Shirou whispered.

There was a pink hue to her cheeks as Saber replied, just as quietly, "It's good to be back, Shirou."

The reunion between Rin and Archer wasn't nearly as heartwarming, and twice as tense. While Sonic explaining how Archer saved Illya from the Badniks helped ease some of the tension, Rin's facial expression seemed locked into a frown, glare, and raised eyebrow. After remaining silent, since Archer's arrival, she finally spoke.

"So," Her voice sounded very much an axe being sharpened. "What makes you think you can just come crawling back here?"

Archer hadn't been expecting that. He figured Rin would at least want an explanation on why he defected in the first place. But there was always a chance she already knew why he left, if only briefly. In any case, he already had the answer to her question.

"Because the Holy War isn't over yet." The white-haired Servant said. Rin nodded, apparently satisfied with his answer.

"But why did you go?" Tails asked, still a bit worried. "What did you want bad enough to join Caster?"

Archer looked over to where Shirou and Saber were. "A new perspective..."

Tails' ear twitched, but he didn't comment. Instead, he went over where Sonic and Knuckles were going through the traditional past time of razing each other.

"...And don't tell me," Sonic said, shaking his head and grinning. "She said we were the bad guys, didn't she?"

Knuckles looked away, grumbling under his throat. This was a common joke, bringing up the times Eggman fast-talked Knuckles into attacking Sonic. While Sonic didn't hold a grudge over the incidents, he certainly wasn't going to let Knuckles forget about them either.

Eventually, the subject of the Caster team came up. The assembled heroes looked over the defeated couple, unsure of what to do. While

Caster was still unconscious, Kazuki had woken up. While the teacher had always been somewhat intimidating, he looked positively menacing without his glasses. He glared at them, as if daring someone to come closer.

"So, uh, what do we do now?" Tails asked awkwardly, "I mean, we've beaten them, but..."

"We have to kill Caster," Rin said firmly, "She's the Servant who's been draining people unconscious."

"But what about Kuzuki-sensei?" Shirou asked, looking down at his teacher.

"We're killing him, too," Illya said matter-of-factly, "It's too dangerous to let him live."

"Whoa, hold on," Sonic said, holding up his hand. "I thought this guy was just an average Joe with a magic girlfriend. Why do we need to get terminal?"

"Because he's a Master," Saber said "As long as he has Command Seals, he could reestablish a contract with an existing Servant and resume fighting in the War."

"How's that again?" Sonic asked, raising an eyebrow. "I thought Servants needed Masters to stay around. Where could he find a Masterless Servant?"

"Some Servants have enough Prana to last on their own, at least for a short while," Illya explained, "And even if there wasn't, another Master could steal his Command Seals for their own use."

"And Kirie's gone, so he can't go to the church for protection..." Shirou muttered, walking over to get a better look at Caster's Master.

"So, why don't we just have him give up his Seals to you three?" Tails suggested, "I think he has enough."

"That could work," Rin conceded. In truth, she didn't want to spill blood anymore than Shirou or the off-worlders did. "We can alter his memories, make him forget about Caster or the War..."

"I will do no such thing." Kazuki's voice broke into the conversation. Everyone looked to him. "I have no intention of bartering with children for my life. Do what you will."

Sonic's quills went rigid from the hardness in the teacher's voice. "Seriously? We're trying to find an excuse to keep you alive, and you don't even care?"

Souichirou looked up at the ceiling of the cavern. "I have been dead for years. I've only found a reason to live very recently."

"You mean the Grail?" Sonic asked.

If Kuzuki was going to answer, no one would hear it. There came a whistling noise and a rush of wind, when *something* fast and gold struck the prisoners dead on. The group stared in horror as the bodies went flying through the air. The attack came out of nowhere, and was so fast that even Sonic was stunned. But for two, it brought memories from the past and future, and they turned around to find the culprit.

That attack... Saber thought.

He's making a move already!? Archer thought.

"Eggman?!" Tails gasped.

"No way, that was too fast for one of his missiles!" Knuckles yelled, he's eyes full of fire.

The walls of the labyrinth collapsed, blown to pieces by an unseen power. As they crumbled, a figure could be seen walking- no, *striding* - towards them.

"I apologize for interrupting, but you were taking for too long for my tastes," He said, "The outcome had already been decided, so why prolong the inevitable?"

Golden hair that stood up in spikes. Red eyes that pierced everything. Armor that was clearly of the finest quality. And a bearing that was not just regal, but had an aura that made him appear larger than life.

Saber's eyes shook at the sight of the intruder. " *Archer!*"

Everyone else looked at Archer instinctively, then back to the visitor. Only Archer- the man *they* knew as Archer- had any indication as to what was going on. And who was approaching them.

History's repeating itself, but in the wrong order! Archer thought, Dammit! It's too soon to fight him! We're all worn out and need to retreat...but Gilgamesh is between us and the only way out.

Once he was close enough, the blond man grinned. "Yo, Saber. It's been too long since we've seen each other. About...ten years ago, wasn't it?"

"How...how are you still alive?" Saber asked, dumbstruck.

Ten years ago... The answer struck Shirou instantly. If Saber knew this man from ten years ago...is he a Servant from the previous War?

The other Archer chuckled. "I suppose it must be a bit overwhelming to be in my presence again. I should have waited until it was just you and I again, as it had been before. But with so many interlopers, I couldn't help but..." He reached behind his back. "...clear out the garbage."

He tossed to objects in front of the group. The sight of them filled everyone else's hearts with dread and sickened their stomachs.

It was Stella and Leysritt. Or rather, their heads.

Archer-2 shook his head. "I was...mildly impressed with the accessories you gave them, but... all you did was dress up some dolls."

What was worse was that the second Archer did not sound cruel. His voice had a smidgeon of callousness, but it carried the same tone of one mocking another form's in ballet. As if their lives didn't matter.

"You scumbag..." Knuckles growled, balling his fists. But before he could go over

"I don't know who you are, but you've made a big mistake!" Illya shouted. Only the smallest of tears at her eyes betrayed her true emotions. "They may have been failures, but they were mine! *Berserker!* "

With a roar, the demigod surged forward. His rage amplified by his Master's, the corrupted form of Herakles ran at the other Archer, shaking the cavern with each step. Yet, even with a muscular Armageddon bearing down on him, the intruder did not appear bothered. A glowing light appeared behind him, and a projectile shot out at Berserker. As usual, the mad Servant did not charge his path. However, he *did* swing his sword to deflect the attack. The Masters realized that if Berserker, a Servant whose most celebrated attribute was resilience, chose to defend...what kind of being was he fighting?

They got their answer when a second bolt shot out from the light behind Archer-2, piercing Berserker's shoulder. As the demigod stumbled, a *third* beam shot out and impaled Berserker in the chest. That's when everyone saw what the attack was.

It was a sword. A demonic, evil-looking sword, with red patterns on the blade that resembled bloodstains, and a thorny ball on the hilt. Shirou recognized it as *Dainsleif* , from the *Nibelungen* . The sword disintergrated, and a stream of golden chains appeared. They wrapped around Berserker, holding him up in the air. The mad

Servant found himself being held up, every limb bound by the glowing links.

"Truly, such a crude Servant," The golden man sighed, "I would have liked to meet Herakles in his proper mind, too."

Berserker yelled in fury, and shook against his bindings. A creaking noise filled the air, as if an oil tanker was coming aground.

The second Archer cocked his head thoughtfully. "So, even in this state, you can overcome Enkidu. Luckily, I have more than enough weapons in my treasury that can end this fast enough..."

"Oh, this'll be over quick, all right!"

Everyone had been so awestruck at seeing Berserker at a clear disadvantage that no one had paid any attention to Sonic and company. The minute Berserker had been ensnared by the other Archer's chains, Sonic, Tails, and Knuckles had gone into Spin Dashes. Three balls of spinning fur slammed into Archer-2, knocking him down to his knees. Tails then fly into the air, and Sonic jumped up to grab his hand. While Tails took Sonic higher into the air, Knuckles got up and rushed Archer-2 and delivered an uppercut that knocked the man off his feet. Before he could fall, however, Tails swung Sonic around and threw him as hard as he could. Sonic shot downwards, and slammed his feet onto the golden man's face. There was a loud crack as the second Archer's head crashed into the ground, pushed down by Sonic's force. The impact was enough to shake the floor slightly, and the possibly concussion loosened the chains, allowing Berserker to fall free.

Sonic opened his mouth to deliver an undoubtably clever quip, but Saber interrupted him. "Sonic! Get away from him, now!"

Sonic turned to address her. "Why?"

He got his answer when the second Archer stood up so quickly that Sonic was catapulted off. Whatever passive manner the stranger

had was now gone. His red eyes were now full of bloodlust.

"You...mongrels! How *dare* you assault me in such a manner!?" Archer-2 spat something out. "And when was the last time you wiped your feet!?"

Two portals opened up, and two weapons shot out and struck Sonic and Knuckles, knocking them down and scattering their Rings. The golden man glared upwards, his vision focused on the flying Fox. Another portal opened behind him, and from it fired another sacred weapon. Before it could hit Tails, Archer fired his own sword to intersect. The impact of both weapons meeting caused a small explosion that blasted Tails down, and causing him to drop his Rings on the way down. Shirou dove and caught Tails with his body. Sonic zipped over and helped both up.

"Uh, I think we may have picked a bad fight." Tails commented awkwardly.

"No kidding." Knuckles grunted.

"It could be worse guys," Sonic said, "It's not like he can shoot more of those things at...once..."

Sonic found himself eating his own words as multiple portals began to open behind their opponent. And coming out were dozens of high-end swords, spears and other weapons. And each one gave off an impossibly strong aura, very much like Saber's *Excaliber*.

"...Y'know, one of these days, I'm gonna shut my stinkin' mouth." Sonic decided.

"I will permit you a few seconds to look back on your lives, mongrels," Archer-2 said severely, "But for the crime of humiliating me in front of my chosen wife, those few seconds will be filled with unbearable torment!"

However, Sonic clearly had other ideas. He yelled, "Everyone! Get on Berserker! We're leaving!"

Archer-2 raised an eyebrow. "Are you hoping that oaf can shield you? I have more than enough A-rank treasures to cut through his remaining lives." When no one replied to him, his expression darkened even more.

Once everyone had piled onto the demigod, Sonic waved to Rin. "Gimme the Chaos Emerald! Now!"

Confused, Rin tossed the gem to Sonic. Catching the red Emerald, the Hedgehog closed his eyes and held the jewel up. Sparks of energy began to appear around his hand, and the light within the Emerald flickered. By this point the weapons the second Archer were already in flight. Death was almost assuredly certain.

Almost...but not quite.

" *Chaos Control!* "

There was an explosion of light and sound, a ripping noise that felt very much like the kind heard several days ago. It was so great that the backlash knocked the sacred arms back, causing them to land haphazardly every which-way. Once the light faded, none of the 'mongrels' could be seen. They had all but vanished.

Gilgamesh was stunned to see this. He looked around the cavern, hoping to see a glimpse of his intended victims. "How did they...no! They teleported?! None of them should have that power...!" He remembered the reaction that happened when Sonic held the Emerald, and sucked air between his teeth. "I *hate* that Hedgehog!"

A pitiful moan reached his ears. Turning, Gilgamesh saw that the Master of Caster had escaped his bonds, and was trying to carry his Servant away. Still angry and full a pressing desire to kill *something* , Gilgamesh began to stomp towards the pair...

Outside the Ryuudou Mountain, Assassin- beaten, cut, exhausted, but alive- staggered towards the Temple's stairway. If it wasn't for his skill with the sword, he would have been killed by the golden intruder's sheer might, just as the costumed maids were. Assassin hadn't had time to truly mourn their deaths, as he had been fighting tooth and nail to avoid following them. In fact, he suspected that the only reason he had survived at all was due to their attacker losing interest and moving on.

I hope Saber's friends can escape as well... Assassin thought.

The samurai wondered what he should do. Caster was either dead or dying, and Assassin used up any Power Rings Caster gave him while fighting the blond man. He had virtually no Mana left. His time on Earth was running out.

At the very least...I can vanish beneath the night sky, Assassin decided, *The stars are beautiful tonight...*

As he moved, Assassin felt a slight pain on his hand. He looked, and saw an odd bug of sorts had landed on it. It must have bitten him. It didn't look like any bug he could recognize. In fact, it looked very much like a...

Assassin felt a very dark presence enter his body. A foul soul had become joined with his, and the samurai felt the urge to retch. More bugs suddenly appeared, flying around him. They began to gather directly ahead of him, and melted together, taking the shape of an hunched-over, shriveled old mummy of a man.

"I would rather have had Hassan-i-Sabbah, but I should be used to working with disappointments," The geezer groaned, stabbing the ground with his walking stick. "At least I can ensure complete obedience from you, False Assassin."

Assassin's eyes narrowed. "Who are you?"

Matou Zouken held up his hand, and a sigil that look vaguely like a serpent eating its own tail appeared on the back. "You may refer to me as 'Master.' And my first Command is for you to Obey..."

Assassin realized that the stars would have to wait...

At the Emiya Estate, all was still. It was the quietest it had ever been since the day Irisviel Einzbern entered the house to exclaim with glee at the traditional Japanese structure. Not even the death of the Mage Killer had provoked such a void in sound.

And so, naturally, the first noise heard was one of the loudest ever-to start with. While it began with a low hum, there came a crackle, an electric sound that vibrated the air. It was followed by a flash of light, as several bodies tumbled out of the air. Sonic, Tails, and Knuckles, we'll experienced with the world-bending power of Chaos Control, landed on their feet, although they wobbled a bit, trying to steady themselves. Everyone else, however, landed on their faces. Berserker's fall in particular caused the ground to tremble.

"What... what happened?!" Rin gasped, sitting up. "We're...we're back! But...the Emerald!"

"Right here." Sonic said, casually tossing the jewel up in down.

Knuckles sighed, rubbing his head. "Geez, I forgot what that feels like..."

Shirou looked around. His senses were... *jumbled* , that was the word. They were calming down, but the whole sensation felt like having his funny bone struck, only a hundred times over.

"Is...is this how you entered our world?" Saber asked, pulling Shirou's coat around her further.

Tails nodded. "Yup! But we need all seven Emeralds to jump between worlds, though."

Saber sighed, standing up. She walked over to the steps of the house and sat down, staring up at the sky. Shirou joined her.

"Welcome back, Saber." Shirou said.

Saber smiled, and leaned against his shoulder. "It's good to be back, Shirou."

Giving Shirou a quick thumbs-up, Knuckles turned to Sonic and Tails.

"So," He began, "Have you guys seen Amy?"

To Be Continued

Einzbern Consultation Room

(Iris and Taiga are playing Sonic and All-Stars Racing Transformed on Wii U)

Irisviel: This racing game is nice, but I miss having a real car to drive.

Taiga: Ahhh, *shishou*, I hear someone coming.

Irisviel: Oh, good, that must be our next guest. *(Shuts game off)*
Welcome to the Einzbern Consultation Room, Servant Caster Medea!

Caster: Mmm, hello.

Irisviel: Now, Caster, do you have any regrets that need to be addressed before you pass on?

Caster: Well-

Taiga: Of course she does! This poor woman was murdered right on the eve of her wedding! That's another tragedy for a million regrets!

Irisviel: Zecchan! (*Hits her with a paper fan*) I see becoming an adult hasn't improved your manners.

Caster: ...But she's right. All I've ever wanted was true love, and when I had a chance to make it real... I can only hope that Souichirou -sama was able to escape.

Irisviel: Oh, he was killed, too.

Caster & Taiga: *Whhhhaatt!?*

Taiga: Hey! You shouldn't criticize someone's manners and then make such thoughtless comments, *shishou!*

Irisviel: Well, telling bad news is like taking off a bandaid...you just need to get it over with!

Taiga: How did someone like you get married...?

Caster: Sou- Souichirou- sama ... (*Begins to cry*)

Irisviel: Oh dear, now she's crying. She'll never pass on at this rate.

Taiga: Let's hold a wake! For Kuzuki- *Sensei!* He was a fellow instructor at the school I work at, and even though he was really stone-faced, difficult to approach, and generally foreboding, he still worked hard for his students!

Caster: That sounds a bit mean to say about someone who died...

Irisviel: Say, Medea, how did you and Souichirou meet? Were you randomly selected to be bound to him by the Holy Grail?

Caster: No, I was summoned by a different Master. He was a traditional Mage of the current era.

Taiga: You mean, a total scumbag?

Caster: Yes, he was completely unworthy to command me, so I killed him. Unfortunately, without a Master, I could only linger in the physical world for a short time...which was when Souichirou -sama found me, and we formed a new contract. But since he wasn't a proper mage, I had to compensate by stealing Mana from the people of the city. Whenever I felt bad about it, I assured myself that it was to remain by Souichirou -sama 's side...

Irisviel: Your motives may have been pure, but your actions were still deplorable. In the end, you were planning to end the entire city just to land a husband.

Caster: Awk!

Taiga: Ah! I have a question! Although multiple Badniks entered your lair, how come only a few found the Chaos Emerald?

Caster: Oh, those machines...I'm not a mechanic, so I can't answer that question. In fact, I find the idea of technology and Magecraft being remotely compatible a total contradiction.

Irisviel: It was probably because you filled your entire stronghold with the Emerald's energy. Their sensors were confused by the widespread power. For example, if you took a compass to the North Pole, or just a room full of strong magnets, the needle would spin around trying to latch onto the largest magnetic field.

Taiga: Oh! Just like Sella being too annoyed by Sonic to be annoyed by Shirou!

Irisviel: Something like that.

Caster: I have my own question. That shock move Knuckles used on Souichirou- sama ...was that just static electric? I feel that there was more to it.

Taiga: In *Sonic Adventure 2* , they had sure-kill techniques, maybe it was one of those?

Irisviel: Oh, possibly. But I doubt they'll be a big thing. Do you feel better, Caster?

Caster: A bit... No, actually. Whatever happens, Souichirou -sama is still dead.

Taiga: Yeah, but...you are too, remember?

Irisviel: Zecchan's right, Medea. Whatever happiness you couldn't find in life, you can surely find death. Go to him.

Caster: He's...he's there? On the other side? ...Souichirou- sama!

Taiga: Ah, a woman in love in both a wonderful and tragic thing to behold...

Irisviel: Yes, but *the true tragedy has yet to begin.*

Taiga: *Shishou!?*

Irisviel: That's all the time we have today, children. See you again soon!

Stained Clouds

Chapter 18: *Stained Clouds*

It was late morning by the time everyone woke up. They were all exhausted, physically and mentally, from the ordeal of the "Caster War", as historians would call it. Shirou was the first one up. His entire night had been filled with nightmares of being trapped in a speeding car while a madwoman pushed the limits of how fast around a mountain turnpike the driver could push the accelerator.

Not that the waking world was less stressful. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Illya had crawled into his bed and had become attached to his left side. But it was finding Saber on the *right* that was the real shocker. It took fifteen minutes of very careful squirming to pull himself out of their grips.

I knew Saber is still worried about Illya, but to think she'd sneak into my room! Shirou thought as he tried to pump blood back into his left arm. *I'm just glad Tohsaka hadn't come in to wake us...*

As he entered the kitchen Shirou got to work making breakfast. Doing basic housework was always a good way to relieve stress. As he worked, Knuckles wandered in, half-asleep. He went outside. Shirou heard the sound of the hose being turned on, followed by a splashing sound.

"GAH! COLD!" Knuckles was heard shouting. He sounded more awake.

He could have splashed water from the sink on his face, Shirou thought, Or does he enjoy doing things the hard way?

Knuckles, with water dripping off of his quills, entered the kitchen. While pouring himself a glass of juice, he noticed Shirou shooting him the occasional odd glance. After swallowing and pouring a refill,

he said, "What? That girl's pet muscleman was hogging the bath and I gotta wash up *somehow*. "

Muscleman? A horrified premonition struck Shirou. Oh no...don't tell me Berserker is in the bathroom!

Shirou's fears were abated when Archer came out. He wasn't wearing his overcoat, and had a towel wrapped around his head.

"Some of us have had that witch's energy piped right into our bodies," Archer said, taking off the towel and shaking his white hair. "You can't blame me for feeling a bit dirty."

"Yes I can," Shirou retorted, "You let her pipes in."

Knuckles grimaced, clearly getting the wrong idea.

"Why don't you wait until you get back to Tohsaka's to shower?" Shirou asked.

"I have a feeling that the minute I take off my clothes, Rin will replace them with a maid costume." Archer replied. Actually, before going to bed, Rin had clearly told him through their link that such a fate awaited him the minute they returned to the Mansion.

It didn't take long for everyone else to get up. The smell of Shirou's cooking was good enough to wake the dead. Saber, despite her exhaustion from the previous night's battle, was the first at the table, wearing a borrowed sleeping kimono and a hungry expression. Not long, everyone else showed up. Soon, they were all seated around the table, eating, chatting, and just getting along. It was heartwarming, but Shirou knew that this was only a brief reprieve. The War would not be over, it never would until the last Servant had been slain. And of course, they would have to take down Eggman and send Sonic's friends home.

I wish these sorts of times would last forever... Shirou thought sadly. But he knew they couldn't. Caster may have been dead, but there

were still the other Servants to worry about. And of course, it was only a matter of time until Dr. Eggman launched another assault on the city. And then there was the matter of the person who attacked them after the battle...

It was Tails who brought it up. "Um, I'm not sure if this is a good time to ask, but, about last night..." He looked imploringly at Saber. "Who was guy with the spiky hair? He seemed to know you."

Rin nodded. "In fact, he seemed *intimately* familiar with you, Saber."

Saber grimaced. She knew that was going to come up, and would have preferred leaving such a history hidden by the sands of time. But Archer, the *other* Archer's appearance had ensured that playing dumb would not be productive. And sometimes the truth was like taking off a band-aid- it was better to get it over with. Everyone looked to Saber. Even Archer, who had already heard her story before, watched the King of Knights, if only to measure her expressions.

Saber began with, "The man who attacked us at Mt Ryuudou, was someone I met ten years ago...during the Fourth War for the Holy Grail."

Tails asked, "So, when you called him 'Archer'..."

Saber nodded. "Yes, he is a Heroic Spirit, summoned in the Archer class of Servant."

Illya frowned. "How could you remember that? Heroic Spirits shouldn't be able to remember what happened to the Servants created from them."

"My circumstances as a Heroic Spirit are different than most," Saber said. She then looked down sadly. "In fact, I have never truly been to the Throne of Heroes."

And so Saber told them of the Battle of Camlann, and how, before dying, she prayed to find the Holy Grail. In response to her desire, the Holy Grail itself pulled her mind centuries into the future, allowing her to appear in the modern era.

"So, you became a Servant *without* dying?" Tails clarified.

Saber nodded. "Correct," She looked to Rin. "Rin, you claimed that my inability to take Astral form was because of Shirou's inexperience and skill as a Mage. In truth, I would have this limitation even if a true Mage had summoned me."

As the group took that in, Knuckles raised his hand. "Okay, so You're not really a ghost. That's cool. But what about your boyfriend from Caster's?"

Saber grimaced, while the grips of both Archer and Shirou tightened considerably.

"That man was not, is not, and never will be someone I consider a romantic partner!" Saber said loudly. In a quieter tone, she continued. "As I have said, that Archer was someone I fought in the previous War. That is all."

"So, who was he?" Sonic asked, "I mean, I've been wracking my brain all night, and I can't think of any legends that include a guy with a bazillion sword-missiles."

Saber sighed. "Unfortunately, I was never able to determine his true identity. All I can say for certain is that he is immensely powerful...as last night proved," With a firm look, she said, "When we fought in the Fourth War, I was completely unable to attain a victory over him. And in my current state..."

The sheer weight of what Saber said was on everyone's shoulders, but it was felt especially by the groups Mages. The strength of a Servant was proportionate to the magical abilities of their Master. There was no doubt that Saber's then-Master was a Mage with

genuine skill and power, unlike the weak novice Shirou. Which meant that even with the power of a fully-realized Mage supplying her Prana, Saber was incapable of overcoming the golden man's power.

"But how could a Servant from a past War still exist?" Rin asked, crossing her arms in thought. "Without the power of the Grail, there's no way he could maintain his physical form for a decade."

"No, there's a way," Illya interrupted, "As you said, Tohsaka, he used the power of the Holy Grail."

"Huh?" Was the word that came out of almost everyone's mouths.

"Have you all forgotten what the War is about?" Illya asked, "Whoever attains the Grail's power can have any wish they desire. My grandfather says that virtually all Servants want is to be reborn completely into our world. Whoever Goldy is, he must have won the Fourth War and used it to make a flesh and blood body for himself."

"Normally, that might be the case," Saber said, "But the Fourth Holy Grail was destroyed before it could fully realize."

"You mean someone broke it?" Sonic blurted out, "How could anyone do that?"

Saber looked pained. "It's possible if one destroys the vessel that was prepared to contain it." It was brief, but her eyes flickered towards Illya.

Rin hummed in thought. "How do you know this Saber?"

Saber sighed. "I saw it happen. I and that Archer were the last Servants remaining in the War before the Grail's destruction."

And it was her blade that did the deed. And it was on Kiritsugu's orders she was forced to do it. Saber would never forget just how

close to victory she had been when her so-called 'Master' had ripped it away from her. And what happened afterwards...

"Well, it probably doesn't matter anymore," Knuckles said, "If a guy that dangerous is gonna be wandering around the city, we'll just have to be on our toes until we find the Emeralds."

Tails smiled. "Yeah, we're already two down."

"And once we have the other five..." Sonic snapped his fingers, "It'll be a *real* party!"

Tails and Knuckles exchanged knowing looks, although Knuckles had his accompanied by a roll of the eyes. The looks exchanged by the Masters and Servants were more quizzical, by comparison. Shirou was about to ask what exactly Sonic meant when the Hedgehog stood up.

"Well, it looks it's gonna be a beautiful day, and there's no way I'm gonna spend it inside," He announced, "Team Sonic, we've got more Emeralds and one more friend to find. *Let's motor!* "

Sonic was away from the table in an instant, and a clatter announced that his dishes had been deposited into the sink. The doors to the backyard had also been left open. Tails gave off a cheer and coptered after him, while Knuckles just got up, wiped his mitts, and strode after the pair. Not long after...

"Hey, why is it, 'Team Sonic'?"

"What's wrong with Team Sonic?"

"It's not cool."

"It's totally cool!"

"Says Who?!"

"I think it's cool."

"See?"

"He's biased, so his opinion doesn't count."

"Anyway, it's my team, so we use my name."

"This is my team, too, y'know!"

"So, What? We call this team, 'Team Knuckles'?"

"Why not?"

"Everything hear of pots calling kettles black?"

"What does cookware have to do with this?"

"I know! We could call ourselves 'Team Sonic...& Knuckles!'"

Then again, Shirou thought, grimacing. Maybe it's a good thing these days won't last... Listening to these off the wall conversations was in a way more exhausting than any battle had been.

"So, we're just going to let them go out?" Illya asked, confused.

"Thanks to Eggman's assault on our school, keeping those guys under wraps is no longer a priority," Rin said, resting her head on the table. "Now, I just want to make sure they don't lead the cops to our doorstep. We've had too many close calls on that front as it is..."

"-And our tests clearly show that the bodies, whoever they came from, *were* originally human." Dr. Pierceman finished his report.

Agent Stuart wondered, as he fought to keep the bile from erupting, if somewhere in the multiverse there was a different him. A version of Agent Stuart whose missions involved less confusing and far less nauseating events. A Stuart whose exploits could be rated "E For Everyone."

Late last night, the police had received reports of loud noises- Crashes, and other cacophony- coming from the Fuyuki Church. Since the area was a confirmed danger zone thanks to the X energy field, the military had been sent to investigate. When they arrived at the church, they had found it in shambles. The amount of damage to the building, while not on the level of what happened when Eggman's robot attacked it, was more than could be done by a disgruntled churchgoer. However, they could find no traces of any of Eggman's smaller robots. It was as if a giant monster attacked the place.

But the more shocking had been the squad's discovery of the church's hidden chambers. Areas that had been unnoticed during the first reconstruction. It was like someone had put the map of a *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign underneath the church. And 'dungeon' was more appropriate a moniker than anyone would have wanted to believe. In one of the sealed, cold rooms, were bodies. Hideously malformed, rotting corpses. But even more disturbing was the revelation was that up until a few days ago (a rough guess at that), these putrid masses of flesh had been *alive*, meaning that A) whoever killed them was *extremely* violent and vindictive in the act, B) these poor souls had been rotting *before* they were murdered. A preliminary check indicated that the number of bodies were equal to the headcount of the orphans who survived the Fire of Fuyuki. The ones who supposedly died of "Natural Causes"

Well, now we know what happened to them, Stuart thought, his stomach still sick. *And, surprise, surprise, Father Kirie is nowhere to be found.*

Kirie Kotomine's background was both very telling, and obnoxiously ambiguous. Although he was a devout member of the Catholic Church for many years, as had every member of his family, it was unclear what position held within the organization before becoming head of the Fuyuki Church. In school, he had shown signs of easily learning almost any discipline, any subject, but before completing a course, he would cut it short. He'd strive to be the ideal student,

but never bothered with becoming a Master. The only psychiatric report Stuart could obtain would describe Kotomine as "Troubled, but detached." He had been married for a time, but his wife had committed suicide, and Kotomine had left their child with his in-laws. A few years afterwards, the Great Fire occurred, during or shortly before which, his father Kotomine Risei had also been murdered, leaving Kotomine to take over the Fuyuki Church. A Kenneth Archibald from England had been suspected, but the man and his own fiancé were murdered as well before they could be found and questioned. Tragedy seemed to indirectly follow the man, but always hit those just within his reach...But it never physically affected him.

"Have an APB put out for Kirie Kotomine," Stuart ordered another agent, "But don't allow anyone but our black ops soldiers approach him. He's dangerous, and knows an obscure form of martial arts. Keep me posted."

As the agent left, Twice continued speaking. "There's something else you should know. That energy spike we detected at the mountain shrine? It's gone."

Stuart looked back Twice. "Gone? What do you mean?"

"I mean there's no energy anymore. It's gone," Twice answered, "Whatever was generating that spike has stopped. The good news is that that same field was what was keeping our agents from investigating. With it gone, I've sent a team to check out the area," Was his smile a smirk? "Sorry for not asking permission."

Stuart waved him off. "Don't be. I'm just glad you're helping. Anything else?"

Twice looked more lucid. "Actually, yes. We've located Bazett McRemitz. She's hiding out in a motel in the red light district. The pink creature, Amy Rose, is still with her."

"Keep the two of them under observation for now," Stuart ordered, "But finding Kotomine is our top priority. Whatever else happens,

he's the key to figuring out what's happening in this city."

This investigation was going in so many directions that it would send Detective Cohen into a mental spin. However, the bug planted in the Fuyuki Church had picked up numerous conversations between Kotomine and another man called Gil-something. (Occasionally, Kotomine would call the other man Archer, but that was clearly a nickname.) The dialogue was vague, and possibly intentionally misleading, but frequent referrals to a "grail" and a "war" were recorded. Nothing substantial enough to justify a direct interrogation, but with the discovery of the bodies...

Let's just hope we can solve this before Eggman launches another attack... Stuart thought.

Dr. Eggman was finishing another session of *Puyo Puyo* (He lost) when a loud beeping sounded off. The image on his computer screen was replaced by a yellow background with little Egg insignias dancing around the borders. The words "EMERALD ALERT!" appeared, and a radar map of Fuyuki, showing several flashing dots over the city.

"At last!" Eggman chuckled, rubbing his hands together. "These readings are undoubtedly the kind you would get from a Chaos Emerald!"

"Oh *my* , what a *brilliant* deduction," an electronic voice sneered, "And you only had to look at the computers giant capital letters only once to do so."

Eggman shot a dirty look at the robot attached to the far left corner of his desk. "Shut up, Proto-Orbot, or I'll junk you like I did with Scratch and Grounder!"

The robot, which resembled Orbot but had tarnished, grey casing, just rolled its eyes. "Oh no, please excuse me, I *completely* forgot about your childish temper tantrums."

Eggman's fist slammed down on the robot, crushing it completely. The robot's arms twitched and convulsed.

"Now I remember..."

Turning on his heels, Eggman strode towards the elevator and took the lift down. He then boarded a conveyor belt that carried him through a wide expanse full of turning gears and pistons. Once he reached the end of the belt, he took a door and entered a wide hallway. Eggman stuck out his thumb, and a taxi cab, driven by an Egg Pawn wearing a chauffeur's hat, pulled. Eggman got in the back, and with a screech the cab drove off. Eggman calmly twiddle his thumbs as they passed several doors.

"Here's my stop, you can let me out." Eggman said, And got out when the car halted.

Eggman entered a door and was quickly pulled down a pneumatic tube designed to carry his considerable girth. The tube deposited Eggman into a large bay, and as he stepped out the mad doctor sighed and stretched, working some kinks out of his back.

"Oh, why did I put my office so far from the hanger?" Eggman groaned.

The lights came on, and on both sides were long lineups of Eggmobiles. Although fundamentally the same design at their core, each Eggmobile had a powerful weapon attached. Further down the line were larger vehicles and weapons, all with a special port for an Eggmobile to dock into and control.

Eggman looked down at all of them. Nodding, he walked over to the side where a slot machine was. Instead of the traditional symbols, such as pictures of Rings, Sonic, Tails, or himself, the slots shown were that of the numerous vehicles that life the bay.

"Decisions, decisions..." Eggman sighed, and then grinned. "But I'm feeling lucky tonight!"

He pulled the lever, and slots began to spin.

The first thing Sakura became aware of was the ringing in her ears. It was faint, but she heard it. It was the only thing that penetrated the darkness that surrounded herself. Sakura then opened her eyes and realized that she wasn't in any darkness. Just her room in the Matou Manor. And the ringing she heard wasn't tinnitus, but the telephone.

Why do we have a telephone? Sakura thought, pulling herself out of bed. She wasn't aware that she had stumbled back to her...well, calling her abode a home would never be accurate. Although her room was prettily decorated in all things typical of a teen girl, it was only in case guests visited the Manor, to keep up appearances. It was just another cell in the prison she had been sold to so many years ago...

Eventually, Sakura found the only working telephone in the entire Manor. It was a testament to the caller's persistence that they did not give up.

"He...hello, Matou residence," Sakura said weakly into the receiver. "Sakura speaking."

"*Finally!* " Shinji's irritated (Or perhaps just irritating) voice came out from the speaker. "*I've been trying to get in touch with you forever! I tried calling Shirou, but no one picked up! And...* "

Sakura briefly tuned out Shinji's rants. Her dreams had been different that night. Instead of merely physical tortures, different memories played by in her mind. Being abandoned by their lord, forcing an army across the world...there seemed to be no rhyme or reason to the dreams that night. The only true pattern was that the visions involved suffering and unrewarded labor...nothing she was unfamiliar with, really.

Shinji eventually got back to the point at hand. " *...so I want you meet me at the Ahnenerbe.* "

"Th-the what?" Sakura asked. The name sounded vaguely familiar, but she couldn't place it.

Shinji made an irritated noise. " *That weird restaurant downtown. Go there and look for me. Don't tell anyone and come alone. And be sure to bring Rider with you!* "

"Okay, but..." Shinji hung up. "Rider's dead..." Sakura finished listlessly.

Then, silence, with the exception of the phone's dial tone. Sakura looked up out a window, at the clear blue sky. Unlike her, the open blue space was clearly in peace.

Now what...?

She hadn't really spoken to Shinji at all since Eggman's attack on the school. He had just packed up and left for a hotel. When Rider returned to her, she had half-expected Shinji to come by and demand control over the Servant again.

But he didn't. Even when he returned to the Manor for a brief time. So what had changed?

Sakura found herself turning her head out towards a nearby window. The sky was so blue...

Zouken frowned as he stared up at the sky. The sheer beauty of the day felt like a slap in the face. It was as if the entire world was mocking his existence by showing how great life could be, when *his* life has been a constant torment.

Or maybe I'm just grumpy from not getting the Assassin I wanted.
the Matou Mage thought as he glared at a conspicuously empty space.

No sooner had he had the samurai bound to him, Zouken instantly developed a dislike for the false Assassin. There was something about the psuedo-Servant's false humility that grated on Zouken's nerves. Actually, it was everything about his false humility. Zouken had been sorely tempted to use Sasaki as a catalyst to summon the *actual* Servant Assassin, but with so many warped changes and aberrations to the course of the Grail War, he couldn't risk it.

(In an alternate timeline, he *did* risk it. Instead of Hassan-i-Sabban, he got *Segata Sanshirou* ...but that's a story for another time.)

Having taken control of the wayward samurai, Zouken's first order was to obtain a Chaos Emerald. After seeing how powerful Caster had become from harnessing the energies of one, he needed those gems now more than ever. The stress of welding its energies might cause his current body to break down sooner than it normally would, but if his plans succeeded that wouldn't be a problem.

Of course, that's only if my useless Fake Assassin can actually get a Chaos Emerald before the War ends... Zouken thought, shooting another contemptuous at the empty space. He was currently on the roof of an office building that was in-between owners. Before, there had been a giant, golden ring floating in the air, spinning. Zouken knew from his observations that such things were gateways to where a Chaos Emerald lay. He had sent the Fake Assassin into the ring, with explicit instructions to not return until he had retrieved the Emerald, and as many of those Power Rings as he could.

That had been a half-hour ago. Either something had gone terribly wrong, or the Fake Assassin was purposely taking an extended sojourn into the Special Zone (A ridiculous name...or perhaps very fitting, given the idiotic direction the War was taking) as a show of defiance. The worse part, was that while Fake Assassin was in the Special Zone, the telepathic link between Master and Servant seemed to be blocked, which prevented Zouken from keeping track of Fake Assassin's movements. For a man who prided himself on keeping control over his pawns, this was the biggest insult he could

receive. Especially since the Command Seals were *his* idea, so long ago, back when she was alive-

No, don't think about , Zouken told himself, There's too much at stake here to distract yourself by reminiscence.

Zouken's bitter musings were interrupted by a flash of light, and there stood the Fake Assassin. Much to Zouken's frustration, that irritating smile was still on his face.

"I have returned, Master," Fake Assassin greeted with his false cheer. "And I bring good tidings!"

"You had better have something more than tidings, you pretense of a Heroic Spirit," Zouken growled, "What took you so long?"

"The area within the Ring was nothing this world could ever equal, Master," Fake Assassin said, "It was if the world was a giant chessboard, and there were these bright spheres, some blue, most red. Navigating it to find the Chaos Emerald was a great hassal."

"So, you found it." Zouken's words were not a question. They were a threat, along the lines of, *Because if you didn't, you're worm food.*

the Fake Assassin reached into his robes and produced the jewel. It was a vibrant green stone that hummed with a force that called to Zouken's worms like a siren song. However, Zouken had more than enough self control to stop himself from greedily snatching it up. He had been monitoring the War, and through his gleanings that Chaos Emerald energy was almost too potent. If he wasn't careful, he would destroy himself. Luckily, Caster had already shown a decent way to siphon the Emerald's Prana while minimizing the damage it would cause.

"We're going back to the Manor," Zouken ordered his Servant, "Do *not* lose that, or I shall be very upset."

As they walked home, already Zouken's mind was buzzing with possibilities...

On the top of a building, Sonic, Tails, & Knuckles were eating some takeout (Purchased from a very surprised vendor) when a beeping interrupted the sound of chewing. Tails put down his wrap and checked the Miles Electric.

"This is interesting." Tails murmured, fiddling with the device.

"What is it?" Knuckles asked, swallowing his fruit smoothie. "Status update on your blog?"

"Knuckles, my blog is in a separate universe," Tails said, "How could I get updates while we're in this universe?"

"Hey, I don't know how half your stuff works," Knuckles defended, "For I all, you did and you're keeping it secret!"

Sonic peered over Tails' shoulder at the screen. It showed a map of the city, with a flashing dot going down the streets.

"Is that a Chaos Emerald, or a Servant?" Sonic asked.

"I think it's an Emerald," Tails said, "The signal didn't appear until a minute ago. Servant signals are constant. Someone must have gotten a Chaos Emerald out of a Special Zone!"

"Then let's get going," Knuckles said, standing up. "If it's another witch like Caster, we could be in big trouble."

"What if it's just a normal person who got lucky?" Tails asked, tucking away the Miles Electric.

Knuckles grinned, and smacked his fists together. "Then *they're* in trouble."

"Better let me do the negotiating, if that's the case, Knux," Sonic said, grinning. "You've never been the best when it comes first impressions- and I've got the chin injury to prove it."

Knuckles was about to retort when a loud explosion caught their attention. Three fuzzy heads turned to see a small plum of smoke rising up from another part of the city. They could hear the faint sound of sirens in the distance...

...along with the sounds of maniacal laughter.

"Oh no, is that Eggman?" Sonic groaned.

Tails cupped his hands over his eyes and squinted. "Looks like," He pulled out the Miles Electric. "Huh, that's weird. He's not going towards the Chaos Emerald's signal..."

"Good for us," Knuckles said, and jumped off the building. "You two go see what Eggman's cooking up! I'm going after that Emerald!"

Knuckles spread out his quills, catching the air and glided away. Exchanging looks, (and wry grins) Sonic and Tails turned their attention towards the ruckus Eggman was undoubtedly causing. They both began charging up a Spin Dash, and shot off into the city.

Somewhere within downtown Fuyuki was a certain restaurant. It was a small café, a bit gloomy in aesthetics, but still a generally decent place to get a meal. This eatery was infamous, among those who knew about it, for being a place of impossible meetings.

None of that concerned Shinji as he took his seat. He didn't care about the name of the place, or its history. All that mattered was that there was a decent throng so he and Sakura could talk and very few could overhear. A nagging voice in the back of his mind told him that the appearance of the diminutive staff should be concerning him, but Shinji forced it quiet. He sat at a table in the corner, his posture set to subtly intimidate.

(Neko Arc nudged Neko Arc Chaos. "That boy in the corner. Is he constipated, nya?"

Neko Arc Chaos took a draft of his cigarette and blew out some smoke. "The inner turmoil of a child entering adulthood...such a dangerous mystery!"

Neko Arc Bubbles nodded, grunting.)

Shinji waited. He ordered an iced tea. He pulled out a laptop and set it on the table and drank the entire glass. When returned from the bathroom, he saw Sakura was waiting for him, sitting across from his chair. Horrible, *horrible* memories bubbled up, and so did his breakfast. Shinji retreated back into the restroom, and once he was done, returned to the table and glared at his sis- *step* -sister. (That made it less nauseating.)

"Hello, big brother," Sakura greeted politely, "I...I haven't seen you since you moved out. Are you well?"

Shinji didn't answer. Instead, he booted up his laptop. He selected the only file on the desktop. As the video loaded, he turned the computer around so that the screen was facing Sakura.

Sakura stared in confusion. "What is this supposed..."

She gasped in horror as the image of herself, lying naked in a pit of Zouken's filthy worms, appeared. Somehow, Shinji managed to sneak a camera into the pit and caught everything on video. She looked at stepbrother, her face going pale as he glowed at her.

"That's right," Shinji said darkly, "I know *everything* . At least..." He closed the laptop. "As much as I could learn from this *one show* . "

Sakura shivered as the full impact of what was happening struck. But what Shinji said next nearly stopped her heart.

"I wonder what *Emiya* would learn if *he* saw it."

He would call her a freak. A deviant. A perverse, sick, weirdo. Such scenarios whirled through Sakura's mind at such speed they made her dizzy. But they all ended with Shirou turning his back on her, forever.

No...No, I can't lose Shirou! She thought feverishly.

"But, I don't really *want* to show him, or anyone, this movie," Shinji continued, "And I won't. But in return, I want you to make me another Book of False Atonement. So I can resume being Rider's Master."

So that was it. It would be so simple. Give up Rider, and save herself. There was just one problem...

"I...can't." Sakura said faintly.

"What?"

"I said I can't."

Shinji didn't respond. At least, not with words. Instead, he stood up, grabbed Sakura by the wrist, and dragged out to the alley.

"Let's try this *again* ," Shinji snarled, pushing Sakura against the wall. " *I* want to be Rider's Master. *You* are going to make that happen. Because if you *don't*, the whole *world* will see what Matou Sakura does before bedtime!"

"But I can't!" Sakura screamed, and began to cry. "Rider's dead."

"What?"

"She was killed a few nights ago," Sakura explained, sobbing. "I don't know how, but she did. I'm not a Master either."

As the sheer futility of their situation, the unfairness of their lives, and every other rotten thing they experienced took hold, Sakura found herself looking up at the sky. Such a clear, blue, sky....

A loud roar preceded the shaking. Shinji let go of Sakura and looked out at the street as screaming filled the air.

Coming down the road was a monstrous vehicle, that looked more a giant, metal water-skimmer. Its body was held up by four long legs on tank treads that knocked over cars too big to be crushed underneath. Attached to the back of the main body was something that resembled one of those Egg Pods that typically housed animals captured by Eggman's robots.

So it was of no surprise that seated a bit too firmly in the cockpit was Dr. Eggman himself. With his goggles fitted over his glasses, the mustache-ed madman glanced over to the alley. According to his computer, there was a huge mass of energy building in there. With the push of a button, a metal tentacle popped out of his car's side and shot towards the alley. Shinji dove to the side to avoid being hit by incoming apparatus. Sakura wasn't so fortunate. The end of the tentacle split open into a clasp, which clamped around her waist. The metal tendril retracted, and faster than it would take for Sakura to scream, it unceremoniously dumped her into the Pod on its back. Once his computer told him that the lock was secure, Eggman drove his "Egg Skimmer" off, laughing madly.

Shinji stared in shock at what had happened. Eggman had kidnapped his sister! Clutching his forehead in frustration, Shinji realized that the doctor's computers must have confused the high Prana in her body for a Chaos Emerald, like he did at the school! He needed to get to a safe place so he could contact Eggman in secret.

Shinji ran back inside the restaurant to pay his check. When he got back to his table, he saw that something was missing.

"Hey!" He shouted a waitress, getting her attention. "What happened to my laptop?!"

The waitress shrugged. "What laptop?"

(Nero Arc presented the laptop to the clerk of a pawn shop. "How much for this, nya?")

After cleaning up breakfast and doing some training, Shirou decided that he needed to visit Taiga. With Saber and Illya in tow, the three went to the hospital where Taiga was recovering from the wound she gotten when Shirou stabbed her with his Projected Rulebreaker.

"I'm doing fine, Shirou," Taiga said when they arrived at her room. Off to the side was a pile of flowers and get well cards from the Fujimura Group. "Grandpa's been taking care of me, and they're going to release me by the end of the day."

"That's good to know," Shirou replied, glad he hadn't hurt Taiga too badly. "Do you remember how it happened?" While Illya assured him that she altered Taiga's memories, it never hurt to check...

Taiga nodded, frowning. "That's right! I was on my way to see you when some dirty mugger tried to jump me!"

Shirou began to sweat. "Uh, whoever it was must have been gutsy to cause trouble in your grandfather's territory..." He should have warned Illya about Fujimura Raina, the head of the local *yakuza* ... even if you had Magecraft, upsetting a gang lord was dangerous!

Taiga sighed, "Yeah, Grandpa had the entire searched, but nobody found him," She clenched her fist in frustration. "And the worst part was, I beat him off, but tripped and fell on his knife anyway!"

"Often, a warrior is most vulnerable after victory," Saber put in sagely, "For that is when they let their guard down the lowest."

Taiga nodded, apparently considering the blond girl's advice. She then said, "Hey, Saber, you used to work for Kiritsugu, didn't you?"

"...Yes?" Saber replied slowly, unsure of what Taiga was getting at.

"Shirou said that little girl is one of Kiritsugu's relatives," Taiga said quietly, "I was wondering if you knew anything..."

"Hey!" Illya protested, " *Don't* talk about like I'm not here when I am! That's just rude!" She huffed, "And I *am* papa's daughter, which makes Shirou my *Onii-chan*! "

" *Huh?!*"

While Taiga and Illya bickered (with Shirou trying to mediate) Saber considered her next words. While it was true that Kiritsugu *did* marry into the Einzbern family and had a child, that child was already six years old when the Fourth Holy Grail War began. In the current day, that girl would have to be around Shirou's age. Of course, Illya *did* help Shirou and Sonic defeat Caster, so the Servant begrudgingly owed her that. Some middle ground would have to be reached.

Saber cleared her throat, catching everyone's attention. "Von Einzbern is the name of family Kiritsugu had married into when he first...contracted my services," She began, "He hired me to safeguard his wife while they did business in Japan. My time in Germany was brief, but before we left, I witnessed him playing a game with his daughter, on who could spot the most buds in the trees surrounding the Einzbern grounds."

Shirou saw that Saber had a far-off look in her eyes, and wondered once more what kind of man his foster father had been before the Fire. Glancing down, he saw that Illya was biting her lip, while her eyes wavered as if she was going to start crying.

It must be painful to remember, for someone of her age. Shirou thought.

Taiga frowned in thought. "So, that's the connection...but what happened to her? Why'd she and Kiritsugu split up?"

Saber looked downcast. "They didn't...not voluntarily. While I was out on a...separate errand...someone intruded in the safehouse we

purchased- the very estate you live in now- and kidnapped Irisviel." She glanced at Illya. "I was unable to save her. She had already been murdered...by the one, I believe now, to have started the Great Fire.

"Kiritsugu and I split apart after that. Given what I've learned now, it's possible that the Einzberns blamed Kiritsugu for Irisviel's death, and forbid him from seeing his daughter."

As Taiga bawled over Illya's "Cruel fate" and pulled the child into a crushing hug, Shirou asked Saber in hushed tones, "Saber, is that true? Did Illya's mother come with you during the Fourth War?"

Saber nodded sadly, and Shirou's mind began race. According to Rin, her own family had been sent away so her father could take part in the Holy War without having to worry about their safety. So why would Illya's mother come along? To ensure that Kiritsugu would use the Wish for the Einzbern Clan? That was possible, but something didn't fit. Shirou could feel a nagging at the back of his mind. He could distantly recall something about unbreakable agreements fashioned with Magecraft.

Shirou decided that once they left the hospital, he would have to ask Saber. But for now, he had a job to do. He held up a box. "Well, I doubt hospital food has improved since I stayed in one, so we brought you a little treat, Fuji- *nee* ."

Taiga dropped Illya and gasped melodramatically. "Oh! A box lunch by Shirou! *Gimme!* " Taiga yanked the box out of Shirou's hands, tossed the lid out the window, and began to guzzle down the meal. Illya, with color returning to her cheeks, staggered over to Shirou.

"She doesn't *act* like she needs to rest, does she?" She gasped.

Shirou grinned. Taiga was an erratic character, all right. He glanced at Saber (She had been especially upset to learn that the meal was being prepared for Taiga, but accepted that the teacher would need

the nourishment), and saw that the Servant was now starting out the room window.

"What is it, Saber?" Shirou asked. He looked as well, but couldn't see anything. He silently Reinforced his eyes for a better look, he saw a column of smoke rising in the distance.

Several columns of smoke.

Shirou's eyes widened. *Eggman!*

Sakura was frightened beyond anything she had felt before. Even the first time Zouken had sent into the Worms was a mild terror in comparison. Back then, while as grotesque as Zouken's familiars had been, they were a recognizable menace. She had known, even as a child, what that pit would do to her.

So what is Eggman going to do me? Sakura thought. He had abducted her off the street with his latest death machine, locked in a box on the back of his vehicle, and now she could feel every turn and jostle.

You'd think he'd install seatbelts for his kidnapees. Whispered a voice that was not hers.

Avenger! Sakura realized, *What are-!? When did you come back?*

Oh, Master, I am never truly gone, Avenger replied, *And I will always be here to help...*

...All you have to do is ask.

Ask? Ask Avenger for help? Better to call for a nuclear strike than rely on such a deviant being. With Rider dead, there was nothing to stop Sakura from seeing Avenger's memories in her slumber. And no matter how much she tried to stay awake, sleep would claim her, and

the nightmares would begin anew. And Sakura knew that if given clearance, Avenger would make those dreams a reality.

Another sharp turn nearly gave Sakura a concussion. She tried to steady herself, but she had become so weak in the days since Avenger appeared that it was a wasted effort.

I just...I just want to escape... Sakura thought as darkness claimed her.

People screamed as engines roared, all as a result of Eggman's joyride around the streets of Fuyuki. The Egg Skimmer either leaped over vehicles not fast enough to get clear, or knocked them over. Not helping matters was the novelty car horn Eggman himself seemed insistent on blowing at every possible moment. It said something about human nature that some drivers tried to honk him back.

"I have the right of way!" Eggman yelled when he heard his phone ring. According to the caller ID, it was Shinji. He turned on the speaker. "Hello?"

" *What the Hell are you doing?! " Shinji's voice shrieked from the device. " Why did you kidnap my sister?! "*

"Oh, you're related?" Eggman asked with passive interest, "According to my radar, this girl is positively *brimming* with Chaos energy, more so than that first girl!"

" *Sakura's more powerful than Tohsaka? "*

"She probably has a Chaos Emerald on her person," Eggman theorized, "Or at least access to one. Oh, well, I can figure that part out when we get back to my lab. Hope she's not a screamer."

" *Wha- Nononono! Listen, I know how to get her to do what you need! Just...don't do anything until I get back to your base! "*

Shinji hung up, leaving Eggman perplexed. He shrugged it off, and focused back on his driving. At this time, the roads had been cleared, giving the Egg Skimmer free rein, it seemed. However, up ahead a large blockade had been set up by a combination of police and military forces.

" Dr. Eggman! This is your first and last warning! Halt your vehicle and surrender! " An officer shouted over a megaphone. When he saw that the Egg Skimmer wasn't slowing down, he tried again. *" Please? "*

Eggman thought it over. *I could just hop over them...nah, I haven't blown something up yet today!*

With one push of the button, the Egg Skimmer fired a missile, blowing the blockade apart. The Egg Skimmer then hopped over the explosion, continuing on its way. As it drove, Eggman's console beeped. The radar was detecting power fluctuations from another point in the city.

Eggman twirled his mustache in thought. A second Chaos Emerald must have turned up. He twisted the yoke and turned right. Eggman reprogrammed the autopilot to hone on the new signature and grinned evilly.

Two for the price of one! Eggman thought, *Nothing could possibly ruin this happy feeling!*

The Egg Skimmer's main body suddenly rocked as something rammed into it from behind. Eggman spun the cockpit around and saw none other than Sonic and Tails running after him!

"Hate to be a buzzkill, but one of your backlights is busted!" Sonic called out playfully.

"Driving with a broken light is against the law, you should pull over!" Tails added eagerly.

" *Sonic!* " Eggman snarled, and gripped his throttle.

The back-left leg of the Egg Skimmer rose up, and then descended down onto Sonic, who rolled to the side to avoid it. After that, the back-right leg rose and came down, also missing. Growling, Eggman tugged at his yoke, causing the Egg Skimmer to hop up and down, trying to squash Sonic underneath it's treads. This damaged the pavement, kicking up lots of dust and debris until Eggman stopped the jumping. Once the dust settled down, the doctor could see plenty of potholes, cracks, but no squashed Hedgehogs and Foxes.

"Yo, Eggman!"

Eggman spun his cockpit around and saw that somehow Sonic and Tails had gotten ahead of him. The scientist fumed as Tails cheerfully waved to him.

"You should go easier on the street, I don't think the city can afford to re-pave it!" Tails shouted.

Sonic and Tails exchanged hi-fives at the Fox's taunt. The Egg Skimmer squatted down, and shot out it's front-left leg at the pair in an awkward kick. The duo jumped to avoid it, and Tails took flight and Sonic's hand. The double-tailed Fox swung Sonic around and flung him at the Egg Skimmer, bouncing the spinning Hedgehog off of the weapon's main body.

"Argh! Stop that!" Eggman shouted as Sonic fell back behind them.

The Egg Skimmer sprang up and hopped after Tails, with Eggman even trying to reach out and grab the Fox with his gloved hands. But Tails hovered *just* out of reach, leaving Eggman to fall back down cursing. Once the Egg Skimmer landed back on the street, Sonic took the opportunity to deliver another Homing Shot, this time hitting the pod on the back.

(Inside, Sakura's breathing became rapid as blood rushed to her head...)

As the three of them fought, the battle reached a wide, multi-lane area. Knowing that he couldn't keep going with Sonic and Tails harassing him every step of the way, Eggman stopped the Egg Skimmer in the middle of the street. Flipping a switch, he had the Egg Skimmer begin to spin around, extending its legs out at several intervals in a bid to strike the duo. No such luck, as Tails just airlifted Sonic out of harms way, then throwing the Hedgehog at the Egg Skimmer's body. Eventually, Eggman had to stop spinning as it was upsetting his stomach. And while the doctor fetched his barf bag, Sonic took the opportunity to strike the Egg Skimmer again. With a furious cry, (Muffled slightly by swallowing his own vomit) Eggman struck a big red button on the dashboard, causing each leg of the Egg Skimmer to hammer up and down, like a quadrupedal tap dance. Sonic and Tails had to *move* in order to avoid being trampled, and just barely stayed out of range. Once the Egg Skimmer slowed down, Sonic hit it again.

Although they didn't realize it, that was the last straw. *Something* black and tentacle-like erupted from the prison pod on the back. The 'Shadow-strands' began to tear at the Egg Skimmer, causing the machine to self-destruct from the stress.

"Whoa! What's up with *that!*? " Sonic gasped, pointing.

Tails whipped out his Mile Electric and began to take readings. "I don't know, but there's a huge amount of energy being erratically released!"

Realizing that *something* was going wrong, Eggman detached his Egg Mobile from the Skimmer and flew away. Meanwhile, the pod from the wreckage and onto the ground, with the solid shadows retreating back inside. Motioning for Tails to keep his distance, Sonic ran up to inspect the pod. Peeking into the gashes, his eyes narrowed, then widened as he got a good look at whatever was inside. He rushed around and struck the button, opening the pod. A teenaged girl from out, saved from hitting the pavement by Sonic's quick feet.

Seeing that there was no apparent danger, Tails flew in for a closer look. "There was a girl in the pod? Is she a Servant?"

"No...she's a human," Sonic said, brushing the girl's hair to get a better look at her face. While he had only seen her a few times, there was no mistaking that purple hair. "She's a friend of Shirou's... Sakura."

To be continued

Tiger Dojo

Taiga: Back! Front! Up! Down! From all sides, it's the Tiger Dojo! I'm your instructor, Fujimura Taiga! Graow!

Illya: And I'm the Number One Student, Illyaseviel! We're back!

Taiga: And from such a long time! Why'd the author have to move into a new apartment now, and then sign up for a writer's workshop?

Illya: Perhaps he wanted to get tips on writing this story?

Taiga: If he needed lessons, why not take the class before writing this story? In any case, our first question comes from Serv, who asks, "Will Sonic fight with a sword?"

Illya: I think might once, if he and Saber ever fought together in tandem. But it won't be for very long. He'd probably get depressed that magic swords in our universe don't talk.

Taiga: If the *Torashinai* could talk, I wonder what it would say...?

Illya: Probably something like, "Don't hit your cute, marketable, student with me."

Taiga: Silence! (*Whack!*) Next question!

Illya: Ugh... next we have Morals, who says, "I just noticed how there's another character from Sonic X. It's Topaz right? She too,

was supposed to be an agent from the GUN from the Sonic anime, like Stuart." Good eye, Morals!

Taiga: Topaz originally appeared in the anime, *Sonic X*, as a partner of Rouge the Bat, assigned by G.U.N. But since Neither G.U.N nor Rouge exist in the Nasuverse, no such luck. Here, she's just an ordinary officer in Japan's Special Forces.

Illya: Yukari Topaz was born to a Mexican father and a Japanese mother. After graduating from high school she entered the military, where she received several commendations for keeping a cool head under fire. This thing with Eggman is really testing her patience, though!

Taiga: We have time for one more question, this from Poe, who asks, "Is Merlin from the Nasuverse aware of Sonic and his friends appearance?" To that I say, yes! He, Wizard Marshal Zelrich and even Arcruied from *Tsukihime* are fully aware of what's happening, and are even taking bets on how it's going to end!

Illya: They're not going to help? What a bunch of jerks!

Taiga: That's the end of our session. I will see you at the next lesson!

Illya: Good bye!

Throw It All Away

Chapter 19: *Throw It All* Away

"I think I've got it." Rin said.

In the living room of the Tohsaka Mansion, Rin was doing an inventory check of her resources. Archer, meanwhile, was not only giving the house a good cleaning, but Rin had also instructed him to make sure the Ring Forge and *Tornado* were in good condition. It felt good to get back into the groove, even if he had to do it while wearing a frilly apron. Thankfully, a full maid's outfit was more costly than his frugal Master was willing to bend for.

"Got what?" Archer asked, leaning against a doorway.

"I think I've figured out how the Fourth Archer managed to survive until the Fifth War," Rin said, and held up one of her *Gandre* gems. "Take this gemstone. I've planted a spell within it."

"Yeah, so?" Archer asked, if only out of respect. He already knew how Gilgamesh lasted until the Fifth War, even though that memory sickened him. But, he also wanted to hear what Rin had thought up.

"So, you could call the jewel a container for its power," Rin explained, "Breaking its physical form would release that power."

"According to Saber, at the end of the Fourth War, the Grail's container was broken. I think that in doing so, it released a huge wave of its power- not enough to grant a wish, but probably enough to sustain Goldy for a while."

"You think the power of that incomplete Grail could keep that Archer alive until now? All on its own?" Archer asked, deliberately feeding Rin a chance to keep talking.

"Well, that would depend on whether or not his Master survived," Rin admitted, rubbing her chin in thought. "If they did, that Master could just keep supplying him with Prana. If not, well, he could just be feeding off the town. He wouldn't even have to attack many people, or even kill them. Just enough to stay in the physical world until the next War began."

By Jove, she got it, Archer thought, Mostly.

Archer's honed senses alerted him to the intruder almost as their crossing the Boundary Field alerted Rin. She stood up and looked to Archer, who Projected his swords in preparation. A series of sharp rapping came from the door.

"Rin! Open up! It's Tails! We've got a problem!"

"What have those three gotten themselves into now?" Rin moaned, and headed towards the entrance. She undid the main lock and flung the door open.

"All right, if one of you has gotten arrested, there's no way I'm helping with a jailbreak..." Rin trailed off at the scene before her.

Tails in front of course, hovering the air with a worried expression. The Fox looked behind to indicate that Sonic should step forward, which he did, with care. Held in his arms was a person who hadn't been near the mansion in years.

Sakura.

"Eggman tried to kidnap this girl," Tails explained, "Then, well, things got *weird*. Can you look at her?"

Stunned, Rin nodded slowly, and stepped aside. Sonic zipped in, but not as quickly as he always did. Rin could actually see him step cautiously to get Sakura through the door without hitting something.

"Hey, nice apron."

"You think so? I always thought of myself as more a summer."

After the death of Rider, Amy and Bazett had journeyed back to the hotel to think about their next move, and secure the Chaos Emerald they had found. Bazett used some runes that she hoped would prevent other Mages from sensing the power. This was *after* she tried to absorb a small bit of its power "just to see" and nearly burned her Mage Circuits. Thankfully, Amy had been there to help stabilize her condition and Bazett recovered soon enough. Now, the two were resting as much they felt they could afford to. Bazett was sending out familiars to scout the city, while Amy...

"Bazett!" Amy shouted, making the Enforcer jump. "I just saw Knuckles!"

"Who?" Bazett took note of the binoculars Amy was holding.

"Another of my friends, besides Sonic," Amy gestured out the window. "I was watching the skies in case something attacked the hotel, when I saw Knuckles gliding through the air! We have to go find him!"

"Now?" The timing couldn't have been worse. "One of my familiars just found another Servant and Master team."

"Who cares?" Amy threw her hands up in frustrations. "You're the one who keeps saying that we can't trust any of these Servants or Masters."

"This Master is from the Einzbern Family," Bazett explained, "They're one of the founders of the Holy Grail War. If anyone can help us deal with that Shadow man, it's the Einzberns. Plus, I think her Servant is the one that fought with Sonic when Eggman attacked the school."

"Sonic!?" Amy's eyes lit up momentarily, and then she out the window in thought. "Okay...you talk to this...eye-zen-burn person

and get them to pass on a message to Sonic. I'll go see if I track Knuckles down and get him on board. Deal?"

Bazett nodded, as that seemed to be a decent compromise. Due to the frequency in Eggman's attacks, people were staying off the streets. Therefore, Amy should be able to find her friend without attracting too much attention. And it would be better if the Pink Hedgehog had something to do that kept her away while Bazett tried to negotiate with the Einzbern Master. Bazett *still* hadn't explained what exactly Enforcers did for the Mage Association, and the last thing she needed was for Einzbern to 'accidentally' reveal it to Amy during their talk. It would tear their friendship apart.

"Let's meet back here at sunset," Bazett decided, "We've got to get a handle on the situation, one way or another."

Following the directions set by Tails' radar and the instincts honed from years of treasure hunting, Knuckles found himself in the sewers. While Knuckles hadn't been in many sewers, there was something about the ones underneath that set his fur on end.

It's like that temple in Sandopolis, Knuckles thought, *Only wetter and smellier.*

Eventually, Knuckles came upon a door. Knuckles' gut feeling told him there was *something* on the other side, but he wasn't sure what. Taking a deep breath, Knuckles slammed his fist against the door. It didn't budge. Frowning, Knuckles punched it again, and again, and again. After a moment, the door gently swung forward. Knuckles slapped his forehead in exasperation, and peered in. In the dark gloom, hundreds of misshapen eyes stared back at him.

"Uh, sorry for intruding." Knuckles apologized, and shut the door. He shivered. That was creepy. He then realized that he wasn't shivering, the entire sewer was *shaking!*

The door burst open, and dozens of hideous creatures flooded out of the room. With a yelp, Knuckles began to punch every beast that got close enough. Which was all of them. Each beast that came into contact with his fists exploded into a gooey mess that afterwards disintegrated, but for every creature that Knuckles killed, more took their place. Realizing that he was going to be overwhelmed if he didn't change tactics, Knuckles crouched down and went into a Spin Dash, grinding away at the creatures. Once he felt he had built up enough speed, Knuckles released himself, shooting forward and plowing through dozens of distorted cephalopods and into the chamber. As the creatures tried to surround Knuckles, the Echidna leapt up and began to crawl up a wall. The room wasn't a very tall one, but Knuckles was able to jump off and slam against the ground with enough force to create a mild shockwave, blasting away a dozen more creatures. Once he was on the ground, Knuckles resumed punching everything that got close enough. It was dark, but he could see that the melee wasn't going to end anytime soon. But rather than intimidated by their onslaught, Knuckles bit down and continued to swing. He knew that in the end, the only one remaining would be him.

That knowledge was challenged when Knuckles accidentally stuck his fist into something's *mouth*. Knuckles yelled in alarm and began to shake his arm frantically as the creature made horribly slobbering sounds. Putting his foot against the oversized starfish, Knuckles tried to pry his hand free. In doing so, more creatures began to close in on the Echidna.

" **KNUCKLES!** "

A second figure burst in, knocking creatures left and right with a... hammer?

Knuckles blinked, and almost stopped punching. "Amy? Is that you?"

"God, this place is disgusting," Amy shouted, "I can't believe those things- *you've got one on your hand!* " She raised her hammer up

"Yeah, I know," Knuckles grumbled, "Where the heck have you been? We've- *YEOW!* "

Both Knuckles and the offending creature made painful noises as Amy brought her hammer down on the creature. It dissolved from the force, leaving Knuckles' hand to take the remaining pressure from the blow.

"Oops, my bad. But it's off, right?" Amy apologized.

Knuckles groaned, blowing on his hand. He shot Amy a look that would have melted glass. As he did, a large creature loomed from behind, its tentacles ready to ensnare the Echidna. Knuckles, without even looking, just swung his good fist back and gave the creature a spiked backhand.

After that little debacle, red echidna and pink Hedgehog worked together, smashing and bashing the monstrosities with aplomb. It took about ten minutes, but soon the room was cleared. Panting, Knuckles leaned against a wall, while Amy rested on her hammer.

"So,- *HUFF* - where's Sonic?" Amy asked as casually as she could.

"Haven't seen- *HOOOF* - him," Knuckles replied, wiping his brow. "We split up when Eggman attacked the city again. But I know where he and Tails have been staying, if that helps."

"That actually does," Amy brightened up considerably, and then looked around. "But what are you doing here, in this creepy place? It looks like the hideout for a serial killer."

"There's a Chaos Emerald nearby," Knuckles said, getting up. "I'll bet these things are drawn to it."

Amy suddenly looked squeamish, as if she just remembered something important and terrifying. "...That's about right, only in reverse."

"What?"

Amy stood up. "These things aren't looking for a Chaos Emerald... they were made by one."

"What do you mean?" Knuckles asked, "Are these things another of Eggman's experiments? They look like Dark Gaia monsters."

Amy nodded. "Yeah, let's be careful. There's a good chance their maker might be nearby..."

"No, not a good chance, Pink Outsider," A hissing voice from the shadows said, "A guaranteed fact!"

Knuckles and Amy whirled about. While the room had previously been empty (As far as they could tell), now there was a third occupant. To Knuckles, he looked familiar. But to Amy, it was the being she and Bazett had been tracking for several nights.

Knuckles instantly put his dukes up. The newcomer was giving off the same creepy vibes he had been getting ever since entering the sewers. At the same time, his "Chaos Emerald" senses were also flickering. The two sensations combined gave Knuckles a chill that not only ran up his spine, but did so while singing.

"I see you've found my little home sweet home," Avenger said, looking them over. "Quite nice, isn't it? I think the previous Caster had little parties here all the time, with his Master gathering guests during the daylight..."

"Let's bring back the tradition."

Avenger shot his arm forward, and it stretched out, writhing like an angry snake towards the off-worlders. Knuckles countered by running forward, first punching the arm away and then continuing to deliver a powerful uppercut sent Avenger flying...leaving the rest of his body from the neck down behind.

"Gah!" Knuckles gagged, jumping back in disgust.

Without missing a beat, the head in the air dissolved into nothingness, while a new head sprouted from the neck of Avenger's body.

"Now, that was uncalled for." Avenger grumbled, rubbing his new head.

"Oh, spare me!" Amy shouted, "What was 'uncalled for' was stealing our Chaos Emerald and using it to create a bunch of freaks and attack people!"

"What?" Knuckles looked from Amy to Avenger and back again.
"This clown has a Chaos Emerald!?"

"Right, and he's using it to create those monsters we just fought," Amy explained, "We need to take him down!"

"Don't have to tell *me* twice!" Knuckles declared, running at Avenger. Knuckles swung another punch at the abomination, but Avenger just shrank into the shadows, narrowly dodging. Knuckles looked around frantically, but couldn't see anything. The room was dark enough as it was, and Avenger's gloomy color scheme was impossible to pick out. Knuckles closed his eyes, hoping his 'Treasure Sense' would let him pick out the enemy's location. As it happened, the fur on the back of his neck began to tingle quite a bit...

"Knuckles, behind you!" Amy shouted, charging.

Knuckles whirled around, swinging his fist out. The back end of his fist managed to strike a wrist, causing Avenger to cry out in pain.

"OW! Those spikes are sharp!" Avenger grumbled, backing away from Knuckles. In his hands were a pair of weapons that looked like a cross between talons and fangs. After Knuckles struck him, he dropped one and it dissolved into nothingness.

Amy gave a shout and charged, hammer raised. Rather than take another hit, Avenger once again shrank away into the shadows. Knuckles darted back as well to avoid the hammer, and the head hit the floor with a thud. Knuckles and Amy then put their backs against each other, not wanting to be taken by surprise again.

"Where did he go now?" Amy asked.

"How should I know?" Knuckles grunted, glaring every which-way. "He turns into a puddle every time we get him, it's like fighting Chaos, but worse!"

And so it went on, with Avenger only emerging from the shadows to attack. Sometimes, he would send more of his grotesque summons to do the attacking for him. Luckily, both Knuckles and Amy had fast enough reflexes to ward off or dodge any assault. However, it was a major strain on their nerves. Amy found herself gripping her hammer so hard her that it was shaking.

"Knuckles, does your communicator work?" She asked.

"We don't need Sonic's help, I've got this!" Knuckles protested irritably.

"That's not what I meant. I lent my communicator to a friend I met," Amy explained, "She's magic, and..."

"There!" Knuckles shouted, charging off. Avenger had stepped out out of the shadows to face him. In the back of his mind, Knuckles wondered why the dark man wasn't moving to block or even fight back.

as Knuckles' fist slammed into Avenger's gut, the Shadow's body seemed to exploded in a black-and-red liquid. When some of the 'drops' landed on Knuckles head-

Paindeathwarffamineholocaustslaverygaschambersguillotineswitchtrialscelebritytrialsstoningswhipsplagueracismcrucifixestitanic

Knuckles fell back howling in pain, desperately trying to whip the poison off. As he did, Avenger raised his hand, it dripping with more of the foul formula. With a yell, Amy leapt and tackled Knuckles out of the way, just barely avoiding Avenger's touch.

"You could have mentioned that he bled *nightmares!* " Knuckles cried, getting up.

"He couldn't before!" Amy replied, giving Avenger a wild stare. "It's like every time we find this guy, he has some new trick up his sleeve!"

Avenger spoke, but his voice had none of the mocking humor it normally had. It was cold and hollow, like an abandoned crypt. "*I am Angra Maiyuu. I am all of the world's evils. These little games are nothing more than a way to pass time...yours is running out.*

" *My Master is ready. Farewell...* "

Avenger faded back into the shadows. Knuckles and Amy looked at each other.

"So, what, did Eggman blow apart *this* planet too?" Knuckles asked.

Rather than taking her into the living room, Rin had Archer carry Sakura upstairs into an unused bedroom. As Rin examined Sakura, Sonic and Tails were telling her and Archer (Who had changed out of his apron) about the latest incident with Eggman. Well, Sonic was. Tails was staring at Sakura's face, squinting as he examined her features. There was something *familiar* about Rin's underclassman, but he couldn't make the connection as to why.

"...And after the weird black stuff wrecked his mech, Eggman high-tailed it outta there," Sonic continued, "And when we checked the Egg Pod, all we found was Sakura."

"And you're sure it was Magecraft?" Archer asked, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

Sonic shrugged. "Dunno about magic, but Tails' radar was definitely picking up some crazy mojo. Right, buddy?"

"Huh?" Tails looked up, distracted. "Uh, yeah, yeah." Getting up, Tails left the room, causing Archer and Sonic to exchange looks.

"O-kay..." Sonic said, awkwardly rubbing the back of his head. He looked at Rin, who was still kneeled in front of Sakura. "So, what's the prognosis, Dr. Rin?"

Rin was frowning as she continued to work. "Her Mage Circuits are a complete mess. It's like she's sending out and drawing in Prana at the same time. And there's...traces..."

"Traces of what?" Archer asked, although he had his suspicions.

"I- I could be wrong, but this...it feels like..." Rin stalled for a moment, "It's like those strange monsters we've been spotting all over the city."

"You think there's a connection?" Sonic asked, walking over. He found himself thinking about the time he became a Were-hog because of Dark Gaia. The image of Sakura, pure, sweet Sakura, inexplicably growing fur and muscles made him shudder.

"Possibly..." Rin stated. "You didn't saw Sakura herself break Eggman's vehicle, did you?"

"I told you," Sonic began to wave his hands and wiggle his fingers. "Buncha black stuff, like living mud."

"I was afraid of that..." Rin scrunched up her face. *What did Zouken do to you, Sakura? And what I going to do?*

Rin didn't want to say it, but it was becoming more and more likely that Sakura wasn't merely 'connected' to the monsters. Judging from

her diminishing health happening in time with the monsters appearance...

...She was the source.

Rin felt her heart being pulled in two directions as she tried to cope with this revelation. The creatures were creations of Prana, just like the Servants. They needed an influx of Mana in order to keep existing. If their creator couldn't provide it, then that was why they kept attacking people, to feed and maintain themselves. So, the most straight forward solution to destroying before they overwhelmed the city was to destroy that maker. If Sakura was causing the "Black Prana Monsters" (Her chosen name for the creatures) then...she would have...to...

Tails came back in, carrying a book. He flipped through the pages for a bit, pausing now and again to glance at Sakura. After about two minutes of this, he said, "I thought so!"

Confused, Rin looked to see what was in the book. She let out a strangled cry when she saw the photos.

"You-!" She hissed, and grabbed Tails by the cuff of his neck. Ignoring his or Sonic's cries, she dragged the Fox out of the room.

Sonic and Archer exchanged odd looks. They followed after Rin, leaving Sakura on their own. As such, neither of them noticed Sakura stirring. The two men didn't have far to go, as Rin was berating Tails no more than three feet away from the door to the bedroom. She held the book in her hand and was waving it like a battle axe.

"...You had *no right* going through someone's private things!" Rin hissed, her cheeks flushing.

"But you *said* it was okay if I stayed away from the magic stuff," Tails protested, "It's just a photo album, what's the big deal?"

"Yeah, what *is* the big deal?" Sonic asked, walking over. "Why's Rin looking like you read her diary and posted it online?"

Rin flushed even deeper, because she *had* once mistaken a social media website for a computer diary once. The debacle still haunted her. Archer took her silence as opportunity to remove the book and see what was inside that set his Master off...more than usual, today.

The pages were full of photos. Some whole, most clippings, but they all featured a little girl with a ribbon in her hair...

Tails would find this, wouldn't he? Archer sighed mentally. He wondered if he should Project some body armor to withstand the inevitable implosion.

"Hey, who's the girl in the pictures?" Sonic asked, taking the book for his own look. "She looks familiar." Although he didn't see it, Rin flinched.

"That's what I thought," Tails answered, "Check out the ribbon in her hair. Looks like the one Sakura's wearing in *her* hair."

Sonic squinted at one picture, then zipped to and from Sakura's room. "That it does, bro," He flipped through the pages, glancing at Rin now and then. "Huh, and this other girl with pigtails, is this you, Rin?"

Rin sourly looked at the floor. "...Yes."

Sonic looked back into the book. They were quite a few of young Rin and the other girl laughing and playing together. "Man, looks like you two were pretty close."

"...We were."

"So, who's the mystery girl?" Tails asked, "Why does she look kinda like Sakura?"

"...Because she *is* Sakura." Rin said finally. She was now staring pointedly at a picture on the wall.

"For real?" Sonic smiled, "I didn't know you two were friends."

"We're not," Rin's bottom lip trembled, "We're... *were* sisters."

"What?"

Annnnd here we go, Archer thought as Rin went into her family's sordid recent history. *This is going to end in tears.*

"So your dad just kicked your own sister out because he didn't want to teach two kids magic?" Tails exclaimed once Rin was finished, "That's horrible!"

"He didn't 'kick her out!'" Rin insisted, "And it wasn't because he didn't want Sakura to learn how to use Magecraft! But the head of a Mage Clan can only pass their Family Crest to a single person."

"Annnnd what's a Mage Crest?" Sonic asked, unconvinced. "Some kind of heirloom?"

"It's more than just that," Rin explained, a bit mollified to be talking about something closer to home. "The Family's Mage Crest acts a container for all of their Magecraft. Each Family head adds to it so their work can be granted to their successor. And the further back a Mage Family line goes, the more powerful that Crest becomes."

"So, what? You can't share?" Sonic asked cynically.

"No, we can't," Rin snapped, "The Crest isn't something you can put on and take off willy-nilly. It's literally grafted onto our bodies. Whole Mage Families have destroyed themselves over the right to bear their Crest. Father didn't want that to happen to us, so he transferred Sakura to the Matou Clan to take care of her training."

"And you're okay with that?" Tails asked, "You're own little sister being pawned off like an extra shoe?"

Rin gritted her teeth. "It doesn't matter. It was a decision made by the head of the Family, and we have to stand by it."

"What 'we'?" Sonic raised an eyebrow, "Weren't you living alone before Tails moved in?"

Rin shot Sonic a dark look. Archer secretly Projected some earplugs so as to shield himself from the inevitable outburst. Sonic *did* have a knack for pushing buttons.

Not that Tails was going to make things any easier, for he then said, "Sonic's got a point, Rin. Where's your mom and dad? They should know what's going on."

"They won't," Rin said quietly, and Archer became very scared. "They're dead."

"...What?" Sonic and Tails asked at the same time.

"Father was a casualty of the Fourth Grail War," Rin said, looking down at her feet. "And mother died a little afterwards. Happy?"

Sonic sighed, "Not really. Sorry about your loss, uh, losses."

"How did Sakura take it?" Tails asked, "Losing her mom and dad, I mean?"

Rin turned away. "...I don't know."

"What do you mean?" Tails persisted, "Was she angry, sad, did you two not talk about it?"

Rin's silence created a void, and that void was filled by Sonic's realization. "You two haven't spoken to each other at *all*, have you? Not since she got kicked out."

"She *wasn't* kicked out," Rin insisted bitterly, glaring at Sonic. "I told you, in order to prevent a fight for the Tohsaka Mage Crest, Sakura

was transferred to become the Matou Clan's heir and receive *their* Crest."

Although none of them realized it, Sakura awoke with a start. A throbbing in her chest had been strong enough to shake her from her stupor. It wasn't her heart, though. In fact, what caused the throbbing had so little heart as was possible in a living being.

...If you could call Matou Zouken alive, of course.

"Yeah, yeah, and a cup of sugar can cure cancer," Sakura heard Sonic talking outside, "But are you seriously telling me that you haven't even spoken with your sister since then?"

"She's *not* my sister!" Rin could be heard almost-yelling, "That was over the minute she left this household. She and I mean nothing to each other. Nothing."

"So why did you keep these pictures?" Another voice- the Fox that was spotted at the school?- demanded, "If she doesn't mean anything to you..."

Pictures?

"Shut *up!* " Rin shouted, "You two... *outsiders* have no right to criticize how a Mage Clan works! You don't belong here! I have *nothing* to prove to you!"

"Yeah, you've got no-" Sonic's voice was cut off by a beeping.
"Hello? Uh-huh. Yup. You're kidding!"

"What is it?" Tails asked.

"Knuckles! He found Amy, they're going to Shirou's house."

"That's great!"

"You sure? I was kinda enjoying the peace and quiet..."

"Sonic!"

There were some laughs. Weak ones. Almost desperate. Sakura was tempted to get up and join them. But she felt so weak, and the pain in her chest wasn't getting better...

Sonic sighed. "Look...Rin? We gotta go and catch up with our buds. But, that girl in there is one of Shirou's friends. Just...remember that."

There was a sound like a rush of air, accompanied by a rapid footsteps. Sonic must have run off. After a moment, there was a whirring sound.

"Rin, Sonic and I weren't trying to...look," Tails said, "I get you have your own way of doing things...but it seems like you're going out of your way to stay hurt, just to please some people that...that aren't around anymore. So...yeah."

The whirring faded. Sakura stared at the ceiling. On the other side of the door, Rin stared at the floor. And a few feet away, Archer stared at Rin.

"Archer," Rin said at last, "Keep an eye on Sakura. If anything happens, tell me." And with that, she walked down the hall, clearly about to bury herself in Magecraft research all over again.

So close. Archer thought sadly, and went into astral form.

After leaving Taiga at the hospital, Shirou, Saber and Illya made an immediate beeline towards the site of Sonic and Eggman's latest tussle. Of course, by the time they had arrived, police and military were already at the scene, cordoning the area off from civilians. Fortunately, the barriers were still close enough to the remains of Eggman's vehicle so that the three could get a better stock of the situation. And while there was the usual shrapnel, soldiers, workers and on-lookers around, Shirou felt something... *different* ...in the air. It was strange, it was foreboding-

-And it was familiar.

"Saber, do you sense anything... *unusual*?" Shirou asked tentatively.

Saber nodded. "Yes. Magecraft. There are...traces of it in the air."

"Maybe it was Sonic," Illya said, "I still can't believe that someone can move as fast as him without some sort of Magecraft." She didn't sound very convinced of this theory, though.

"No, it can't have been Sonic," Saber replied, "Even if he was capable of Magecraft, this sensation is far more toxic than anything I've sensed from him."

She's right, Shirou thought to himself. *And more to the point, it feels like something I've sensed before...*

"Well, it looks like Sonic already took care of everything," Illya commented, "So, we should go home."

"Does that mean you'll be going back to your castle, Illyasviel?" Saber asked, her eyes narrowing.

Illya just sniffed. "No, why should I? It's still a wreck, and I'd be all alone. I'm staying right here with *Onii-chan*. Don't worry, Saber, I'll take good care of him after Berserker grinds you into a pulp."

I'll win that fight just to spite you. Saber thought annoyedly as Shirou gave his Servant a helpless smile. While the alliance with Illya had progressed somewhat without incident, Saber was still suspicious of the little homunculus. She knew that of all of the Mage families, the Einzberns were the ones most determined to obtain the Grail. She wished Shirou would stop enabling this "Little sister" act.

"Look, let's just get back to the grocer shopping," Shirou said, trying to play the peacemaker. "Taiga is being released by the end of the day, and I know she'll want a feast to celebrate. We'll be having

dinner with the rest of her family as well, so let's just be on our best behavi...or..."

Shirou trailed off as something caught his eye. It was a small bird, but it wasn't acting naturally. Instead of flying naturally, it seemed to be doing loop-de-loops in the air. So far, nobody else had noticed, except for him, Saber, and Illya. The bird also smelled like Magecraft.

"Saber? Illya? What do you make of that?" Shirou said quietly, gesturing towards the bird.

Glancing at it, Illya shrugged. "It's a Familiar. Someone wants our attention."

The bird stopped looping about and began to fly towards an alley. Exchanging nods, Shirou, Saber, and Illya followed after it. The Familiar led them through several alleys, taking them further from the crowd. Saber and Shirou tensed slightly, worried that they were being led into a trap. It would be so easy to cause a ruckus and cast blame on Eggman... Illya, on the other hand, just hummed. As the Master of the Strongest Servant (in her opinion), Illya was quite confident that any attempt at an ambush was doomed to failure.

Eventually, the Familiar landed on top of a garbage can. There was a note taped to the lid, which read, "Lady Einzbern- We must meet to discuss a threat to the Holy Grail War and the secrecy of Magecraft. Please bring your Servant Saber and Sonic to this location so we can talk privately."

After reading the note, Shirou turned to the girls. "What do you think? Are you going to check it out?"

Illya sniffed. "I could. Or I could talk to the person who left this *right now*."

Saber marched over to the door of an empty building. With all the ease of opening a really stubborn jar of pickles, she forced it open. A

moment later, an adult woman with short pink hair came out. She was wearing a suit and an annoyed expression.

"If you want to send a secret message, it's usually a good idea to not wait for a response less than a meter away." Illya pointed out smugly.

Bazett grimaced. Her initial waiting spot had been the roof of the building, but she had to duck into the skylight to avoid being spotted by some kind of surveillance drone. While she had never given much concern to machines before, the events of Fuyuki had instilled in Bazett a new respect (And probably mild terror) in the wonders of technology.

Shirou, on the other hand, had one question. "Why do you want to see Sonic?"

Bazett looked firmly at Shirou, and then looked away in shock. After a moment, she turned back to the high school Mage, her expression blank.

Why did she act like she's seen me before? Shirou thought.

"Because I'm friends with Amy Rose." Was Bazett's reply.

And with that, she had their attention.

"So, this is where you guys have been staying since we got stuck in this universe?" Amy asked as Knuckles let her into the Emiya Estate.

"Yeah," Knuckles explained, wiping his feet. "The owner's some kind of part-time wizard, but he's okay. Kinda boring, but not bad. Could be worse."

"I'm sure Shirou will take that as compliment." Sonic remarked, seated at the kitchen table with Tails.

" *Oh Sonic!*" Amy squealed, and knocked Knuckles aside to charge properly.

Sonic rolled his eyes, but chose to let Amy throw herself on him. However, he was sure to adjust his head properly whenever she tried to plant a kiss. Once he felt that he had allowed Amy to express the necessary amount (according to him) of affection, Sonic pried himself loose of the spiny pink death grip.

"Sorry if I'm a little clingy today," Amy apologized, "But I was so worried about you guys. Things have been crazy in this universe!"

Tails sighed and looked up at the ceiling. "Tell us about it."

"Well, there's this crazy mud-guy creating Dark Gaia monsters running, for one thing..."

"What?!" Sonic and Tails exclaimed.

Amy quickly gave a brief run down of her encounters with the Shadow man.

"I've been seeing these things whenever I got out at night," Sonic mused, scratching behind his left ear. "I had no idea that there was a *person* responsible."

"Rin said that a Servant in the previous War could summon these things," Tails pointed out, "But that Servant wasn't summoned for *this* War."

"Well, it must be a pretty easy spell to do," Knuckles commented, crossing his arms. "The guy I found in the sewers looked like someone colored Shirou black and covered in tribal tattoos."

"Did you beat him?" Sonic asked.

"No, he pulled a Chaos and slipped away." Knuckles grumbled, recalling the water-monster Eggman once let loose on Station Square. He rubbed his forehead.

"You okay?" Tails asked.

"When we were fighting, some of that Angra guy's blood got on me," Knuckles said, "It still itches."

" *Still* itches?" Sonic asked, "Since when does blood itch?"

"It's not normal blood," Knuckles said, "When it first got on me, I started... I don't know, seeing things."

Tails got up for a closer look at Knuckles. Pulling out his Miles Electric, he held the device over Knuckles' head.

"Hey, watch where you're pointing that!" Knuckles protested, "I don't need a brain scan, I'm fine!"

Tails ignored him, and focused on the data. Walking away from Knuckles, he sat back down at the table and inputted commands into the computer. Sonic, well-versed with Tails' technical mojo, didn't need an explanation. He knew his trusty partner would use that stain to track down the Shadow Man. As Tails worked, Amy went to retrieve a first-aid kit to better tend to Knuckles.

"Let me see if we can get that stuff out, Knux." Amy offered, spraying disinfectant into a rag.

"Hey, it's fine, you don't have to- Mmph!" Knuckles' protests were cut off by Amy's poor aim.

"Hey, could you guys keep it down? I'm trying to work here," Tails protested, and after a few more minutes, whooped. "Jackpot!"

"Nice job, Captain Super Fox-Man," Sonic said, scratching behind Tails' ears. "So, where's Shadow the Not-Hedgehog?"

"Ahhhh- Huh? No idea, still analyzing," Tails shrugged, "But a video I posted on social media just got its millionth like!"

Sonic rubbed his forehead.

"So, Rider's movements were inhibited by the Shadow's attack?" Saber questioned Bazett.

They were walking back to the Emiya Estate. The trip was taking a bit longer than necessary, as Bazett wanted to avoid the more populated streets. As they walked, the irishwoman told them about her encounters with the Shadow. Saber was most interested in the second battle, and the weapon the Shadow had demonstrated.

"It was hard for me to tell," Bazett confessed, "It was night, and we were distracted by the summon that was trying to steal the Emerald. But the wound didn't close up, even though Rider should have had enough Prana to heal it, I'm sure of it," Her eyes drifted briefly. "It mentioned Lancer breaking his spear, afterwards, however..."

To the humans, that sounded like an unlikely scenario. No Servant would willingly break their Noble Phantasm. Saber, however, knew of one Servant, a Lancer, who did just that. And combined with the revelation of the Shadow Man created the Fourth Caster's monsters...

This Shadow is channeling- or just emulating- the abilities of the Fourth Holy War's Servants, Saber considered, and said so.

"How could you possibly know that?" Bazett asked, "How could you know what kind of Servants fought in the Fourth War?"

"Because I fought in that War myself, ten years ago," Saber replied, "To explain further would reveal my identity."

Bazett narrowed her eyes and looked away in frustration. She had been hoping for some intel once this situation with the Shadow was resolved, and Lancer had become her Servant again. While she hadn't told the others about her previous status as a Master, no doubt they already suspected her.

Shirou spoke up. "...Bazett. According to Rider, the Shadow is connected to her Master, right?"

Bazett nodded. "She wouldn't give many specifics, but she did claim that the Shadow was feeding off of the Master."

That was a new one. Rider's Master was Shinji, but there was no way he could have the Mana to supply both Rider and the Shadow. Then again, they haven't really seen Shinji since the Battle at the Harbor...could something have happened to him? Shirou knew they had to find Shinji to get down to the bottom of it.

"We know the identity of Rider's Master," Saber said, "So it should be easy to find him."

"And then what?" Illya asked, "Are we going to kill him? Cut off the Shadow's power source and hope it withers away like a normal Servant?"

Shirou was aghast. "No, we're not killing anyone. We're better than that," Illya gave him a blank stare. "Well, we should be."

"Rider seemed to think that Caster had the means of separating The Shadow from her Master without fatality," Bazett put in, "We were working out a plan to negotiate with Caster when the Shadow attacked us."

She's probably referring to Caster's Rule Breaker, Shirou thought, Rider must have witnessed Caster using it to steal Saber's Command Seals.

"Caster's dead, so that's out," Illya said, "We'll need to figure out another way to deal with the Shadow."

"Instead of bothering with the Master, we should focus on the Shadow itself," Saber decided, "Even if we break contract is binding them- However we do it, -That won't stop the Shadow from latching onto another Mage."

As they walked, discussed, and debated, the talk turned to Bazett's relationship with Amy Rose.

"We assumed that Amy had gone into hiding with another Mage," Shirou said, "How have you two been working together?"

"She's a bit too fixated on Sonic, if you ask me," Bazett confessed, "It can get a bit annoying. But she has a good heart, and she saved my life for what it's worth."

That definitely sounded like the Amy Rose Sonic and his friends described. Still, Shirou had to be sure that Bazett wasn't pulling their leg. Or worse, that she wasn't holding Amy hostage. And while people from Sonic's dimension had proven to be surprisingly resilient against direct mind control, Knuckles' interactions with Caster had proven they weren't completely immune to Magecraft entirely. He unconsciously reached for his communicator, planning to slip away to call Sonic and update him. A loud beeping came from the communicator, causing the girls to look at him. With a sigh, Shirou activated it.

" Hey, Shirou! It's Sonic! How're you doing? " Came from the speaker, *" We're not interrupting anything? "*

"It's all right, Sonic, it's safe for us to talk." Shirou replied, "What do you need?"

" Well, just wanted to give you a few updates. First off, did you hear about Eggman's road rage? "

"Yes." The girls began to gather around as Shirou slipped into an alley.

" Well, don't panic, but your friend Sakura was a little involved in that . "

"What do you mean?" Saber asked.

" Dunno why, but Eggman tried to kidnap her. She's fine for now, but something inside the prison pod ripped Eggman's car to pieces. We took her to Rin's house for a check-up. From what she says, Sakura's got some kind of magic disease. "

A disease. Shirou remembered all the other times he saw Sakura. How listless and tired she would be whenever she thought no one was watching. At first Shirou thought she was just upset about the killings and Eggman, but...wait. Did Sonic mean a curse?

" Got some good news, though. We found Amy! Well, more like she found us. She's been staying with this Mage from England. "

Out of the corner of his eye, Bazett flashed a smirk that said, "I told you so" with big neon letters. Illya, who had been a bit suspicious of Bazett herself, rolled her eyes. A loud clang sounded from the speaker.

"What was that?" Shirou asked, "And where are you right now?"

" Back at your place, to answer the second question. As to the first...uh... "

" Hey, Sonic! " A female voice called out from the speaker. Shirou assumed that was Amy. *" Ask if you're friend is going to be around for lunch! "*

"Lunch?" Saber asked, her eyes meeting Shirou's sharply. Bazett just put her palm against her face.

" Yeah...Amy's decided to make a meal to celebrate our reunion, " Sonic admitted awkwardly, *" She's not a bad cook, but usually she works in kitchens built to her size... "*

Shirou broke into a run.

In the Matou Manor, dirty deeds were afoot. Of course, technically they had been afoot ever since the property had been established, all those centuries ago. To ensure that his clan would have the power to remain part of the Grail Wars, Matou Zouken sank deeper and deeper in depravity. And any time his conscience tried to speak up, he would squash it with the insistence that such acts were necessary to obtain the Holy Grail. In time, the conscience would cease speaking at all.

Now, as Assassin stared at the glass case in lower levels of the Manor, he understood that all of Zouken's past transgressions were nothing more than a prelude to the horror that was sure to begin. The case had been placed in the very center of the properties leylines, with specialized runes on and surrounding it. Various Crest Worms were crawling about it, making horrible, high-pitched noises.

"Yes...this should do very well..." Zouken could be heard murmuring. His voice echoed off of the dungeons walls. "It's time I regained control of this idiotic War."

Assassin shook his head mournfully. Whatever happened next, he knew it would only end in tears.

Sakura woke up with a shock. She could feel Zouken's presence. It was stronger than usual. And...there was something else. The terrible feeling that had been simmering in her body, ever since Avenger appeared, seemed to have doubled. She could hear both their voices, not really as words, but as feelings, throb throughout her being- one demanding total obedience, the other urging her to release her smothered pain onto the world.

...obey...

...release...

...Obey...

...Release...

...OBEY...!

...RELEASE...!

Sakura couldn't take it anymore. She pulled herself out of the bed- A bed, when was she in a bed? -and lurched into the hallway. She didn't recognize her surroundings, but it almost looked like the Tohsakah mansion. But this was impossible, she was banished from the Mansion. Sakura staggered about, trying to get her bearings. Her sixth sense was being overloaded, inhibiting her other five senses.

The...the sky... Sakura thought feverishly, I have to find the sky...no one can take the sky...

Somehow, Sakura made her way downstairs without causing an accident. And even more remarkable was that she managed to find her way outside. But instead of clear blue skies, grey clouds covered everything. A short distance away, there was a tarp covering something.

"I don't like this, Archer."

Sakura froze. That was Rin's voice!

Sakura wandered towards an open window. She could see Rin sitting in a chair, with her back to the window. She didn't see Rin's Servant, but knew he was probably around somewhere, perhaps in astral form.

"I *mean*, Sakura's Mage Circuits weren't just out of whack, there's something else, too." Rin suddenly said. Sakura guessed that Archer was communicating with his Master telepathically.

Should I listen in...? This is a private conversation... Sakura wondered. But she felt too exhausted to , hearing Rin's voice helped distract her from the *other* voices.

"There are traces of a different Prana there as well.

"It's like those creatures that have been spotted all over Fuyuki. There's a definite connection.

"It's like...she's the source..."

Sakura froze. Oh no. It couldn't be. But Rin was an excellent Mage for her age. It was why Father kept her. She *would* figure something out.

Desperately, Sakura looked upwards. Just barely, she could see a figure on the Mansion's roof. Was it Archer, keeping a look out? But why? Any intruder would trigger the Boundary Field.

"I know what that means, Archer." Rin continued.

Sakura didn't know why Rin was talking out loud, but she knew what it meant to be the source of a dangerous menace. Where creations of Magecraft were concerned, they could only exist due to a constant influx of Prana. If you removed the source of that Prana, the Creation would cease to function.

And Sakura was the source.

But Nee-san wouldn't due that, she cares... Sakura thought feverishly, She kept those pictures, that means she cares...!

"I don't *care* if she's my sister!" Rin suddenly shouted bitterly, "We're not just talking about a threat to the secrecy, but maybe all of Japan!

"It would have been better if Eggman took her after all."

Sakura fell back against the house. She slid down and into the ground. Rin's cold words had taken the feeling from her body. She couldn't even hear the urgings from Zouken and Avenger. An emptiness had consumed her heart and mind.

And it was sure to be filled.

To be continued

Tiger Dojo

Taiga: Strike the band! Strike the match! Strike *OUT!* It's the Tiger Dojo, with your Instructor, Fujimura Taiga!

Illya: And the Number 1 Student, Illya! Because it took so long for this chapter to get out, we're going right into the Q/A, with our first question from Hiro. He asks, "What happens when Sonic wields Saber's Excalibur when Arturia herself can't fight. Like would the abilities of Sonic's Excalibur combine with Saber's?"

Taiga: Certainly not! Saber's Excalibur would allow Sonic to wield it, but Sonic wouldn't be able to use it's Noble Phantasm. The two King's are separate people, and so are their swords! The next question comes from Edgar Black, "Does Avenger have access to the Noble Phantasms of Iskandar's and Lancelot's?" Number One Student, answer this!

Illya: He does. He used the Fourth Lancer's spear during his fight with Rider, and it's been established that he can use the abilities of any Servant who died during the Fourth War before Kiritsugu destroyed the Grail. Of course, Avenger isn't much of a fighter, so he wouldn't be able to bring out their full potential.

Taiga: And now for our last question, from Easley, "The souls of the Servants Avenger absorbed the 4th Grail War are conscious? How in self-aware?" Well, obviously, they, uh...Hmm...Welllll, Saber was turned evil when she got absorbed in Heaven's Feel, so...

Illya: Right now, they are not. Remember, in the canon Heaven's Feel storyline, the Shadow corrupted Saber, but completely digested Gilgamesh. Ergo, the latter is what happened to the Fourth War's Servants when they entered the Grail. However, if Avenger attains enough, it's possible that he could summon those Servants...Wait...

Taiga: No spoilers! (*Whacks Illya*) That concludes our lesson! I will see you at the next practice!

Illya: Argh....see you then!

Unhealed Scars

Chapter 20: *Unhealed Scar*

Originally, Archer had...reservations about being so close to Sakura while she slept. Not just because she was once his underclassman in another lifetime. Not just because there was a chance that she had a direct connection to the mysterious threat to Fuyuki. There was the fact that she tended to toss and turn in her sleep, and Archer didn't want to peep. He was a gentleman, after all.

He was also worried about Rin. Despite the image she projected, that calm, "proper-Mage apathy" veneer she clung to as a defense, she was truly conflicted about Sakura's condition. In his life as a human, he didn't find out about the Tohsaka Sisters until long after the Fifth Holy War ended. It hadn't been a pleasant reveal then, and that wasn't going to change in this lifetime either. The only way she could even cope with their separation was by clinging to the traditions of Mages. Traditions that Sonic and Tails had attacked without hesitation. He could only hope that Rin wouldn't do anything stupid just to vent.

...!

Archer felt this strange tremor. It wasn't a physical vibration, but a shaking within his soul. Something had entered the Fuyuki leylines, just as they did when Sonic and his bunch first appeared. He gave Sakura a passing glance. So far, she seemed to be sleeping rather peacefully. Unable to concentrate, he went to the mansion's roof. Maybe whatever caused that feeling could be seen.

No dice. All seemed well on the horizon. The only problem was that it was somewhat overcast. Grey, just like the situation. No telling how it would go. Maybe it would clear up and turn out well...or down spiral into another mess.

Archer, we need to talk. Rin's voice cut into his thoughts.

I'm listening. Archer replied, he glared in the direction of the sea, where Eggman's Flying Torpedo had flown off to. Maybe it was the mad doctor's machinations that were causing this uneasy feeling.

I've been going over what I've found in Sakura while examining her injuries, Rin began, And then I've been cross-referencing what I learned while helping Illya make that Fake Emerald. Absorbing Chaos Emerald energy, while good for a boost, can damage the body. A Servant is made of Prana, so they could handle the strain better than a living Mage could. When Shirou tapped into an Emerald, it nearly tore him to pieces.

So, you think whatever's happened to Sakura involves a Chaos Emerald. Archer guessed.

Rin didn't answer at first. "I don't like this, Archer."

Archer blinked. Did Rin say that out loud? Why should do that? She must have been concerned. *I'm sure we can stabilize her with those Power Ring pendants you made.*

I don't think those would be enough to deal with what's happening here.

What do you mean?

"I mean , Sakura's Mage Circuits weren't just out of whack," Rin said aloud, "There's something else too."

What else is there?

I told Sonic and Tails that Sakura's Mage Circuits were stressed out from taking in and releasing Prana, but that was only part of the problem. "There are traces of different Prana as well in there, as well."

What kind of Prana?

The non-human kind. And I don't mean Sonic's gang. "It's like those creatures that have been spotted all over Fuyuki. There's a definite connection."

You mentioned that to Sonic, but I'm guessing you mean there's more to it.

"It's like...she's the source..."

"I *know* what it means, Archer."

Archer knew this feeling. He had felt it a dozen times during his times as a Counter Guardian. He had given his existence to the Alya so he could protect humanity. Unfortunately, in the present era, humanity's greatest threats came from humanity itself.

Protect the most by eliminating the few.

Would you do it, though? Archer asked mentally, If it becomes apparent that Sakura's condition is causing the creatures to come out at night and attack people...if there's no way to resolve that peacefully...could you stop it at the source? When Rin gave no response, Archer knew he had to push a little harder. Even if she's your sister?

"I don't care if she's my sister!" Rin shouted, causing Archer to jump a bit. *And it's not going to come to that. Whatever this is, I can figure it out!*

Okay, Rin hadn't given up on a less terminal solution. That was progress. *Glad to hear you're still in the game, Archer sent, But what exactly are you going to do?*

No reply. Archer could just visualize the consternated frown on Rin's face as she fumed.

Why not talk about this with Shirou and Illya? Or better yet, just Illya. We know Shirou would act just like Sonic did.

And you expect Illya to be any more helpful? Rin sent back bitterly, *She's an Einzbern, they don't have much empathy for anything beyond their personal interest. Seems to work out pretty well for them, too.*

Up until Eggman attacked, it did. Archer reminded, *Castle's still in shambles.*

"...It would have been better if Eggman had taken her after all." Let Berserker run amok in his hideout.

Archer chuckled at the idea, but knew that would have been bad for everyone. Rin had told him that Eggman's machines had drained her Prana when he had captured her. Illya was so powerful that there was no telling what weapon Eggman could make from her energy.

Archer lost his good humor when he felt a powerful sensation. It was the creepy feeling he had gotten while watching Sakura, only now it wasn't as subtle as it had been before. What he felt then had been a tickle... *this* was a full-fledged earthquake!

Archer looked around, and out of the corner of his eye saw something purple from below. Taking a closer look, he saw a certain someone right outside Rin's window.

When did Sakura get out of bed!? Archer mentally blanched, I was so concerned with this bad vibe and then Rin I completely forgot about her! How much did she hear!?

Archer then realized that the terrible force he had been feeling was directly centered around Sakura's body. Whatever happened in Eggman's machine, it was going to happen right there.

Rin! Move!

Archer wasn't even halfway down when everything went black.

Luckily, when Shirou got back to his house (And only mildly winded from running) the kitchen wasn't in *too* much of a mess. In fact, the only real issue was the multitude of dirty dishes and pans that had piled up, along with a floor carpeted with crumbs.

Amy had made sandwiches.

Introductions went along smoothly, and soon they were all eating. Saber in particular had engulfed three, although she confided to Shirou, "They are not as good as yours, Shirou, but it would be impolite not to try them."

Once the crumbs had been cleared away, they got to business. Shirou quickly brought Sonic and Tails up to speed about what Bazett had told them, concerning the Shadow.

"And *Shinji* 's supposed to be the evil mastermind?" Sonic asked skeptically, "I don't see it."

"That's not what Rider said," Bazett replied, mentally registering 'Shinji' to look up at a later date. "She said that the Shadow was using her Master to stay alive."

"Kinda how Servants like Lancer and Rider attacked people to drain their Mana?" Tails asked, "If that was happening to Shinji, he'd be a mess. Rin told me that it takes a lot of Prana to keep just one Servant alive, much less two."

"There's no way a normal human could survive that," Illya piped up, "Even if they had enough Prana to support two Servants, the stress would be too much for them." She took a bite of her sandwich.

"...We haven't seen Shinji for quite some time." Saber noted.

"So let's find him," Knuckles declared, "This Shinji kid can lead us to Angra, and we take him down."

"Angra?" Shirou asked, confused.

Amy nodded. "That's what the Shadow called himself when Knuckles and I fought him in the sewer. He said something like, 'I am Angra... something' and vanished."

Illya became very still. Her eyes widened considerably.

"I'm trying to track him with the Miles Electric, but it's weird," Tails admitted, "The signal is all scattered, though. It's like he split into separate pieces."

"When the Shadow created those demons, it looked like they were breaking off from his body," Bazett recalled, "That might be what your gadget is picking up."

Tails scratched behind his ears. "Maybe, but I dunno... It didn't pick up those monsters before..." He glanced at the homunculous. "Do you have any ideas, Illya?"

"Yes..." Illya looked away evasively, and then sighed. "Everyone, I think I know what is happening here. But for you to understand, I need to explain to you the true purpose of the Holy Grail War."

That caught everyone's attention, especially Saber's. They gathered around and waited for Illya to talk. When she did, her voiced seemed to have a far away quality to it, as if she was speaking in a dream.

"A thousand years ago, the Einzbern Family commanded the Third Great Magic, the Heaven's Feel. However, that power was soon lost to them. Unwilling to accept this, the Einzberns dedicated themselves towards rediscovering the Third Magic. However, after eight hundred years of failures, they came to accept that they would need help. To that end, they sought out the aid of two more clans of Mages, the Makiri of Russia, who would later become the Matou, and the Tohsaka of Japan. Working together, the three families created a ritual where seven Mages would summon seven Heroic Spirits to fulfill the Heaven's Feel."

"Hold on, seven wizards and seven spirits? That sounds like the Grail War." Knuckles interrupted.

Illya nodded. "It is. In order to recruit four more Mages, we lied and told the outsiders that the purpose of the ritual was to have a wish granted. But that was where the problem began. Only one can claim the 'wish', and so the Masters of the First Holy Grail ritual quickly began to fight among each other. The cooperation between the three Families of the Holy Grail dissolved, and the ritual in time became known as the Holy Grail Wars. The Heaven's Feel was unfulfilled, and hasn't been achieved to this day.

"After two failed Wars, the Einzberns decided that a new approach was needed. In the Third War, the Einzbern head Jubstacheit Von Einzbern chose to cheat the Servant system by replacing the Berserker-class with a new class called Avenger, and with that summoned the Angra Mainyu, an evil Zoroastrian god."

"Whoa! Like a *God*- god?" Tails asked, impressed.

Illya sighed sadly. "Not quite..."

"Far from being a divine figure, Angra Mainyu was just a simple peasant whom had been tortured endlessly by his fellow villagers as a scapegoat for all of the world's evils. During the Third War, he died early into the conflict."

"Well...it coulda been worse," Sonic noted, "In my experience, 'evil gods' aren't what you'd call team players."

But Shirou made the connection. "Is 'Angra Mainyu' what the Shadow called itself, Knuckles?" He asked the Echidna.

Knuckles nodded, smacking his fists together. "That's right! But that thing wasn't some peasant, it was a bona-fied monster."

"...when a Servant dies in a Grail War, their essence and energy becomes absorbed by the Holy Grail," Illya explained, "The Grail

then becomes a portal to Akasha, the Root of all existence. When Avenger was killed, his spirit traveled to Akasha to corrupt the Grail."

"Corrupt it?" Shirou asked, "How?"

"Before, Servants were made from truly pure and good heroes," Illya continued, "Avenger's corruption is the only reason why dangerous Servants like the psychopathic Caster of the Fourth War, or the vampiric Rider of this one, have been summoned."

"Illyasviel," Saber interrupted, "How does this connect to the creator of those unholy monsters?"

"Maybe it's our fault," Amy suggested awkwardly, "When we entered this world, the Chaos Emeralds did something to bring Avenger back to life?"

Shirou was about to protest this, for the sake of his new friends, but he saw that everyone, even the devil may care Sonic, looked thoughtful. However, he knew he couldn't let Sonic's gang take the blame for everything.

"Let's not jump to conclusions," Shirou said, "This is all conjecture. We have no idea just how badly Avenger's corruption is causing the Grail."

Saber then stood up. She glared at Illya, her eyes glistening.
"Illyaseviel, you said your clan *lied* to the other Masters about the true purpose of the Holy Grail. Does that mean it *can't* grant a wish... *at all?* "

Illya shrugged. "Essentially, it's just a mass of power to be harnessed. Even if Avenger's presence wasn't contaminating it, the Grail isn't an omniscient wish-granter."

Saber made a choking noise. She shook. After a moment, she bolted. A slam was heard from the house's entrance.

"Saber!" Shirou cried, getting up. He ran out chasing his Servant.

"What was that about?" Knuckles asked, confused.

"I think I know," Sonic got up and stretched a bit. "If Saber's using her top running speed, no way Shirou's catching up to her. I'll see if I can slow her down a bit, or at least help Shirou catch up."

Sonic was out the door in a flash. Once he was gone, Tails looked to Illya, confused.

"Illya, if your family knows the Grail is tainted and the wish is a hoax, why are you fighting for it?" The Fox asked.

Illya sniffed. "The Einzberns have been hunting the Holy Grail for centuries. After all this time, we just desire the prestige from claiming it."

"Seriously?" Amy put her hands on her hips in annoyance. "You're only in it for *bragging rights*?"

Illya shrugged. "You don't understand how important pride is to Mages."

Knuckles crossed his arms and snorted. "Oh, we understand, all right. Doesn't mean we have to *like* it."

Tails reached back to stroke his tails. "Wait, you said the Matous and Tohsakas...do you mean Rin and Sakura's families?"

"Who's Sakura?" Illya, Amy, and Bazett asked automatically.

"She's Shinji's little sister, I think..." Tails looked conflicted for a moment. "...And Rin's, too."

Illya and Bazett exchanged looks. Things were starting to add up...

When Sonic found Saber, it was at the bridge where he first saw Shirou and the girls while fighting Lancer. The blond Servant was looking down at the water, a dead look in her eyes. Seeing her like that took Sonic back to that conversation they had not long after the destruction of Eggman's airship.

" How did the story of King Arthur end in this world?" Sonic asked Saber.

Saber did not answer at first. Instead, she stared up at the sky. Finally, she answered, "At the Battle of Canaan."

Sonic sighed. "This world too, huh?"

Sonic then told Saber the full story behind his own brush with Arthurian legend. How Melina the wizard tried to freeze Camelot in time with her corrupted false King. And how Sonic choose to let the story end in order to free its people.

Once Sonic was done, he saw that Saber had a conflicted expression on her face.

" You don't approve?" Sonic asked.

" It is not my place to say." Saber said firmly, "But...I am surprised to hear you give up on a kingdom. You never tire of talking about your other saving ventures."

Sonic shrugged. "This was different. Didn't seem right to force people to remain trapped, stuck in place. Sometimes the best thing is to move on, and let the people choose their own endings."

Saber didn't reply.

" So, what are you going to wish for if you win?" Sonic asked, "To bring back your own Camelot?"

Saber looked at him resolutely. "My wish, should I achieve the Grail, is to undo everything about my reign."

Sonic raised an eyebrow. "You mean you wanna go back in time and do it over again?" For some reason, the idea of time travel gave him an uneasy feeling.

Saber shook her head. "No. My intention is to erase myself from history, and for someone else to pull the Sword from the Stone."

Sonic's quills went rigid. "What?!"

Saber nodded. "I did everything I could to serve my people. But in the end, it all fell to ruin. My own kingship was a mistake, from beginning to end. The people of Camelot deserve better."

" But that's nuts," Sonic protested, standing up. "Erase yourself? You don't mean from existence, do you?"

" I do," Saber said with absolute finality, "It's more than fitting. My failures will be paid for and my kingdom saved. What else could I ask for?"

" How about saving your kingdom and staying Alive?" Sonic demanded, "Doesn't that sound good, Too?"

But Saber refused to budge. "Nothing worth having can be gained without sacrifice, Sonic."

" Sacrifice what? " Sonic asked, "It sounds like you're just running away!"

Saber fixed him with a stern glare. "Isn't that what you do?"

" That's different," Sonic insisted, "You're not giving up your life to fix your kingdom, you're tossing it away to make it someone else's problem!"

Saber's hardened even more, and Sonic without a doubt knew that this girl before him, once upon a time ago, forged a nation during barbaric, turbulent times. And you couldn't do that without an indomitable will. Saber wouldn't give this up easily.

Finally, she said, "Sonic, please do not tell Shirou my wish. He does not need to worry about this now, with so many other matters to concern him."

Sonic frowned. But decided to leave it be. There was still plenty of time before the wish could be granted. Hopefully, Saber could be convinced by then...

Sonic shook the memory away. She needed no convincing now. Sonic walked up and sat down next to Saber.

"Saber..." Sonic began tentatively, "Are you okay?"

Saber did not respond to him. Very faintly, Sonic could have sworn he heard her mutter something along the lines of "For nothing..." But it was hard to tell.

"Look, I know it stinks that the wish turned out to be a dud," Sonic said, "But it's been hundreds of years since Camelot fell. Sometimes you just gotta let go of the past. I mean, there's no way to tell if your replacement would have done any better, right?"

"It's not that..." Saber moaned, "It is far, far, worse."

"What is?" Sonic asked.

Saber choked back a sob. "I...I am the one who caused the Great Fire..."

"What!" Sonic exclaimed.

Saber nodded sadly. Taking a deep breath (To hold back her tears?), she began her tale.

"I told everyone that the Grail of the Fourth War had been destroyed before its power could form completely. I was the one who destroyed it."

"Wh-why would you do that?" Sonic asked, still stunned.

Saber's eyes hardened. "It was Kiritsugu. He ordered me to destroy the Grail's container with a Command Seal. But with its container broken, the power within the Grail flooded out and over the city, destroying all in its path. I..." She paused, as if gathering her thoughts. "As my Master, Emiya Kiritsugu was a cold, honor-less man. He treated everyone around him as either a target to be eliminated, a tool to be used, or both. During the War, he acted without chivalry, and held no respect for those that did. He justified his unscrupulous actions as a necessary evil to bring world peace with the Grail."

Sonic scratched his head. "Are we talking about Shirou's Kiritsugu? 'Cause the guy Shirou mentioned sounded a lot nicer."

Saber gave a bitter smile. "I know. During my slumber, I saw Shirou's upbringing under him. I was surprised to see that side to him," She sighed, "Ever since I reappeared in this War, I have always wondered why Kiritsugu would betray us so, why he would cast aside everything he had worked for. And even after learning of his reason..."

"Still a bit of a gut-punch, huh?" Sonic asked, getting a total Shadow (the Hedgehog) vibe from Saber now.

"Don't you understand, Sonic?" Saber asked back, "I only accepted the tragedies I suffered in pursuit of the Grail...and now that has been lost to me. E...everything I've done in this War...has been for nothing."

"That's not true."

Saber and Sonic turned around. There behind them was Shirou, on his bike. There were beads of sweat on his forehead, and he was a bit red in the cheeks. He must have Reinforced both his legs and the bicycle as he pedaled in order to catch up with the pair. He must have been tired, as he didn't bother setting the kickstand; he just let the bike fall over as he walked over to where Sonic and Saber were. Once he sat down, he continued.

"You saved my life from Lancer, remember?" Shirou said, "If you hadn't appeared then and there, he would have killed me," *Again*, "And when Eggman attacked, you helped defend the school. I can't imagine any other Servant that could have done those things. I know it's selfish of me to say so, but I'm glad you appeared in this War, even if you can't get your wish."

Saber closed her eyes. When she opened them, her gaze was directed entirely at Shirou. "Shirou. You have told me that you only seek to prevent another disaster, and had no wish. But..." She looked away briefly before looking back and continuing. "If you did not have to worry about anything else- Not Rin, not Illya, Sonic, or even I...what would you wish for?"

Shirou's answer was immediate. "There's nothing I want that I can't get on my own. I hope to become a hero of justice someday...But I don't need a Wish to achieve that."

"But what about your family? The one you lost in the Fire?" Saber persisted, "Would you not wish them Back? Or for the tragedy to have never happened?"

For that, Shirou had to think. Then he said, "I can't remember who my old family was...or who I used to be. I have no motivation to return to that. As for preventing the Fire... As much as I hate myself for not being to do anything...that incident is part of who I am. If I were to Wish it away, it would only cheapen the importance of the lives that were lost."

Saber looked down. After a moment she wiped her eyes. Sitting between them, Sonic got up, and allowed Shirou to get closer to Saber. The Master put his arm around Saber's shoulder, comforting her. A respectful distance away, Sonic watched.

Must resist urge to ruin the moment with a joke, Sonic thought to himself, *Resist...resist...resist...*

Then the alerts on Sonic and Shirou's communicators went off. With a sigh, Sonic turned away to speak into it. Behind him, Shirou answered his.

" *Sonic! Shirou! Did you guys find Saber?* " Amy's voice came from the speaker.

"We did." Shirou replied, and offered his wrist to Saber.

"I apologize for running away like that," Saber said, "Is everything well?"

" *No- I'm getting there, shut up!* " Amy shouted at someone on her end, " *Tails picked up a bunch of high energy surges.* "

"How many, and where?" Sonic asked, all business.

" *One's at the Ryuudou mountain.* "

Sonic raised an eyebrow. "Caster's place?"

"We didn't kill Caster," Saber determined, "She must have recovered and is rebuilding her forces somehow." *Or it could Archer...*

" *The second is where the Matou family lives, and the last is at the Tohsakah Mansion!* "

Shirou felt his heart leap into his throat. Sonic shot him a look showing that they were thinking the same thing; of Rin and Sakura's condition.

" *We're all heading to Ryuudou to check out the surge there,* " Amy continued, " *Can you two look at the other ones? Tails tried calling Rin, but she's not answering!* "

"I'm already going to Rin's place," Sonic said, and in that instant he had vanished from the bridge in a flurry of footsteps. His voice continued to come from Shirou's communicator. " *Shirou, Saber, can you two see what's going on at the Matou's?* "

Saber had already picked up Shirou's bike. By the time Sonic finished talking, she was sitting behind the handlebars. Even though the bike was a bit rusty, and she wore hand-me-downs from Rin, she looked just as regal and noble as if she had been in full armor on horseback.

She declared, "*We can.* "

"Stuart, we have a problem!" Twice ran into the room, looking harried.

Stuart looked up from some notes he was compiling. According to this latest report, there was a hostage involved in the latest Eggman incident. Thankfully, the blue creature had saved her, but then took off for parts unknown with the girl before she could be properly identified. According to reports, there was a chance it was Matou Sakura, a classmate of Emiya Shirou and Tohsaka Rin, but these were unsubstantiated.

"What is it?" Stuart asked, no longer sounding remotely bothered. Lately, events were happening with an escalating frequency. There was no time to be shocked.

"I just lost contact with the team at Ryuudou Temple," Pierceman said, "There was a huge energy spike at the mountain and other locations. But when I called the workers at the temple, no one responded."

Stuart grimaced. "We can't take any chances. Let's see if those--"

"Agent Stuart!" Another agent (Stuart couldn't remember his name) ran in. He said, "We've just gotten word that McRemitz has met up with Emiya's team. Furthermore, now she, the Einzbern girl, and some of those creatures are heading out to Ryuudou!"

Stuart nodded. "Right. And what of Emiya himself? Or the blue one?"

"We've lost track of them."

Stuart rubbed his temples. "Right. Let's focus on the party heading towards Ryuudou..."

Getting to Ryuudou was a difficult affair. It wasn't night yet, but Tails, Knuckles, and Amy were adamant that they needed to investigate the Prana spike *now*. To ensure that they could reach the mountain without being spotted, Illya went out and "borrowed" a van. With the off-worlders safe in the back of the car, hiding under a blanket, and Bazett in the driver's seat, the group was relatively free to travel to Mt. Ryuudou unnoticed. "Relatively" being that they had to avoid soldiers and other armed personal stopping cars to ask awkward questions. After taking six u-turns and fifteen detours, Bazett and Illya began to simply take turns hypnotizing anyone who pulled them over. It wouldn't have been so bad, except Knuckles had become impatient and began asking "Are we there yet?" over and over.

"We're here." Bazett announced in a tired tone.

"Finally!" Knuckles cried, leaping out to stretch. "I was starting to get claustrophobia under that thing!"

"Well, we're here now," Tails said, and took out his Miles Electric. After checking the readings, he announced, "The surge is definately coming out from Caster's Lair. It's become relatively stable, but it's still rising."

"Where's the entrance?" Bazett asked. She adjusted her gloves, readying herself for a fight. She was having flashbacks to her jobs as an Enforcer, sent to capture Mages who the Association had given a "Sealing Designation." Hopefully, whatever was happening wouldn't be as messy as *those* incidents...

Tails pointed. "That way."

They walked towards the tunnel. The closer they got, Amy saw that both Illya and Bazett had pained expressions on their faces.

"What is it?" Amy asked, concerned. She turned and saw Knuckles looked similarly pained. "Is something going on?"

"There's an...unpleasant aura coming from the cave," Knuckles responded, and glanced at the mages. They nodded, clearly sharing his thoughts. "I'm going in first."

No one replied, and so Knuckles took that as his cue to take the lead. So far, the tunnel leading to Caster's labyrinth seemed unchanged from the last time the heroes. But as they got closer to the end, a bright light could be seen in the distance.

"Hold on, what's that?" Bazett asked.

Humming, Illya fashioned a bird from some magical wires and sent it towards the light. As soon as it entered, her expression became confused. "It's...full of sand?"

"Caster made a city by herself," Tails noted, "Maybe whatever's happening ground those buildings into gravel?"

"Only one way to find out." Knuckles said, as he lead the group into the light.

It wasn't merely "Full of sand". It was a full-fledged *desert*! Complete with a clear blue sky and a bright, shining sun. This caught the gang off-guard, and they spent several precious seconds squinting until they got used to the sudden brightness. But once they could see clearly, they also saw that they weren't alone. Three figures were awaiting them, all clad in black, with eyes, yellow and slitted, like a lizard.

In the center was a gigantic man, maybe two meters in height, clad in armor that used to be bronze and wearing a mantle with a fur

collar. He had a short beard that went around his chin, and red that, while short, was wild and untamed. By his waist was a large sword.

On the left was a slim, but well-built man, weilding two spears. He was handsome, his beauty apparently enhanced by a mole under his eye.

And on the right...was armor. It was a suit of black armor, that of a medieval knight's. But from within the armor, an vile smog seemed to emit from each crack, shrouding the figure. The helmet had a thin slit where the eyes should be, with a ghastly red glow seeping out from within.

"Huh? Who are *those* guys?" Amy asked, taking out her hammer.

"Not the welcome wagon, that's for sure." Knuckles noted, putting up his dukes.

Illya felt something shake within her soul. A tremble that she could not explain. Gritting her teeth, she pointed and declared, "Whoever they are, they're in the way! *Berserker!* "

With a roar, Berserker appeared from his astral form and charged at the trio. But just as he was within striking range, the black knight moved. He spun his around and swept out his foot, catching Berserker's heels with such speed that the demigod could not react in time. As Berserker fell, the knight jumped and snatched at the great stone sword. The weapon of Berserker became cloaked in the same black mist that shrouded the knight's armor, and then turned black, with red vein-like marks all over. The knight swung down, and cleaved into Berserker's neck, chopping his head off! Then, as a follow-up, the knight landed a solid kick the decapitated body, knocking it back a ways.

To say the heroes were stunned to see this was an understatement. They gaped in horror as Berserker re-grew his head.

The man with two spears said, "You cannot pass this point. The Holy Maiden requires her solitude."

The large man in the mantle said, "Bring Saber. Without her, you have no chance."

And the black knight, still holding Berserker's corrupted weapon, said, " *Ar...thur...* "

To be continued

Tiger Dojo

Taiga: Could it be...? Can it be true...?! Yes! It is the Tiger Dojo! I am your instructor, Fujimura Taiga!

Illya: And I'm Illya, the Number One Student!

Taiga: Those guys! They're always getting into something *crazy*! But there's no time for that now. We have questions to answer! Number One Student!

Illya: Journey to the End asks, "Are the Fate characters able to use the power of all seven Chaos Emeralds?" If using one Chaos Emerald will cause the Mage pain, using all seven will definately kill them. But, if they combine the Emeralds with fifty Power Rings, something amazing might happen...

Taiga: Our next question comes from Captain Falcon. They write, "Why Cream the Rabbit and Cheese weren't brought by the Chaos Control?" Huh? Cream and Cheese? Oh! It's a pun! But who are they?

Cream: Excuse me, Miss Taiga?

Cheese: Chao?

Taiga: KYAAAH! You're so cute!

Illya: Oh no, she's in cuteness overload! Quick, run you two! I'll hold her off!

Cream: Is she going to be all right?

Cheese: Chao-chao.

Taiga: Mmf!

Illya: There! Those wires should hold...now, why are you here? Or more accurately, why aren't you in the story?

Cream: That's because it's a school night.

Illya: What?

Taiga: Mmf?

Cream: Mother won't let me go out and save the world during the school week, unless it's an emergency. Anyway, Sonic can usually take care of it himself.

Illya: Usually...they may be out of their depth this time...

Cheese: Chao!

Cream: Yes, those men look scary...especially that black knight.

Taiga: Raah! (*Snap!*) I'm free! I'll get you for that, Number One Student, but first the last question!

Illya: Biscuit the Adventurer asks, "Is the sonic game that decanonized itself because time shenanigans considered canon here?"

Taiga: Canon is a difficult thing to determine, especially in the Fate series, but for the Sonic series, that's for Sega to decide.

Illya: Translation: We don't know.

Taiga: Quiet, you! (*Whack!*) And that's also for tying me up!

Illya: Argh...

Cream: Oh, uh, I guess that's the end of the show for now.

Cheese: Chao, chao-chao! (See you next time!)

All Hail Shadow

Chapter 21: All Hail Shadow

When Sonic got to the Tohsaka Mansion, his first thought was, *What happened here?*

Thankfully, the damage to the building was severe. It was just a missing wall. The good news was that was the only thing broken. Whatever happened didn't damage the *Tornado*, and the Ring-maker was untouched. The bad news was that neither Rin, Archer, or Sakura were anywhere to be found.

Or maybe that's the good news, Sonic thought, kicking a piece of debris. *No trace means they might have just run for it...or got kidnapped.*

What was more, there were traces of the same substance from Eggman's vehicle around the damaged area. Whatever happened with Sakura that time, happened again. Sonic did another zip around the grounds and mansion in hopes of finding a clue as to what happened. No such luck. As it was, Sonic's MOD for problem solving involved running towards the source and unleashing high-speed havoc on it.

Of course, if whatever happened happened at the same time the Matou place and Mt. Ryuudou, then maybe Archer and the girls are already at one of those places, Sonic considered, *I better radio Tails and Shirou...*

But just as Sonic was reaching for his communicator, he heard something move. Looking, he saw the Omochoao desperately trying to push off a piece of wall that was pinning it to the floor. Running over, Sonic kicked the piece away and picked up Omochoao.

"I forgot about you!" Sonic chuckled, dusting off the robot. "So, see what happened here?"

Omochoa said, "To do a spin dash, hold the Z button and the B button at the same time!"

Sonic sighed, "Oh, right, I forgot."

Sonic turned Omochoa over and looked at its back. After a minute of fiddling, he flipped up the lid showing a space in its body. It was a dial with two settings, "Redundant" and "Useful". Sonic twisted the point from the former setting to the latter. Once he was done, Sonic reset the lid and let Omochoa hover in the air.

"Let's try that again," Sonic said, " *What* happened here?"

"There was a mass of negatively-charged energy emitting from Sakura's vicinity," Omochoa reported, "Although they looked like tentacles, they were more like tendrils of half-solid water."

Like Chaos? Sonic thought, and asked, "So, is that what happened to the wall? And where are Rin and Archer?"

"Unknown," Omochoa replied, "Archer leapt to combat the energy when a second being appeared to combat him. Archer then took Rin and ran."

"So he got Rin out? Good," Sonic pressed his communicator, "Maybe I can hail him... Yo, Archer? You and Rin all right? Where's Sakura?"

There was no answer at first. Sonic grimaced in worry, but before he could repeat himself, a voice responded.

" *Sonic, Archer here. Sorry we couldn't reply sooner. Our communicator broke in a struggle. I've only fixed it now.* "

"Yeah, I can see the damage," Sonic replied, "But what happened to you?"

There was a pause. *" It was that same creature I saw when Eggman attacked the school. He did all this. "*

"That's not what Omochao told me," Sonic said, "He said Sakura went berserk, and created that dark energy again."

" Omochao? That stupid toy can talk? Figures. All right, you caught me. It was Sakura. Rin thinks she's connected to the Shadow. It would explain why her health is going down. The Shadow works like a Servant, using Sakura's Mana to maintain its power. But some of its power is going back into Sakura, but it's beyond her control. "

"You don't know the half of it," Sonic said, "According to Illya, the Shadow is a Servant from the Third Grail War, Avenger. She thinks he's cursed the Holy Grail, or something."

" Is that right... "

"Where's Sakura? And you guys?" Sonic asked.

" Rin and I are fine. I managed to pull her out before she could be seriously hurt. But, I lost track of Sakura. "

"I think I know where she could be. Your house isn't the only place where a huge energy spike happened. There were two more spikes- at the Ryuudou mountain and the Matou place. There's a good chance that Sakura might be at one of those places."

" Worth checking out... "

"Shirou and Saber are going to the Matou's, and Tails took the rest of the group to Ryuudou," Sonic continued, "Me, I'm a little worried about Shirou and Saber. From what I hear, Sakura's grandfather is a pretty mean wizard himself."

" Yeah, he is ."

"You two head towards Ryuudou, meet up with Tails and the gang," Sonic suggested, "Catch you on the flipside!"

"...I guess we will." Archer said, breaking the connection. He turned.

In truth, they had already been on their way to the Ryuudou Temple when Archer repaired the communicator. When the Shadow (Or rather, Avenger) had appeared at the Tohsaka Mansion, Archer attempted to destroy it by Projecting Caliburn in hopes that the energy of the holy sword would be enough to destroy the corrupt Servant. And it probably would have worked, had Avenger had not taken Sakura to use as his shield. Archer had hesitated, just long enough for Sakura and Avenger to make their escape. Luckily, Avenger's farewell had given them a clue as to their destination.

" I would love to see how this plays out...but the Holy Grail beckons..."

In order for the Holy Grail to appear, the container needed to be in an area where the leylines of Fuyuki intersect. One of those areas was at the Ryuudou mountain, which was why Caster had set up shop there. And judging from what Sonic had said, something powerful was going to emerge in that spot.

But why? Archer thought, The Holy Grail requires the energy of all seven Servants to form. There are still multiple Servants alive. What is going on there?

Besides Archer, Rin walked besides him. The Tohsaka Master had a grim look on her face. In her hand was the Azroth Dagger she brought with her to Caster's. She had managed to bring it with her when they retreated from the mansion.

"So, Rin," Archer began, "What are you going to do?"

Rin looked up. Although her expression hadn't changed, her eyes were now hard as steel. "What I should have done from the beginning."

Archer nodded, but inwardly sighed. No matter what she decided, there was no way this mess wasn't going to be resolved without tears.

Shirou wasn't sure what to expect when he and Saber had arrived at the Matou Manor. While there was definitely an energy in the air even a cut-rate Mage like him could feel, the property's overall appearance hadn't changed at all. It was, as far as Shirou could see, still the same home Shirou and Saber had visited once at the beginning of the Holy War.

Of course, that wasn't to say there wasn't anything new. The samurai guarding the entrance hadn't been there the first time.

However, the heat on his Command Seals told him that this wasn't some new cosplay security guard.

"Shirou, that's a Servant," Saber whispered, confirming his suspicions. "Be on your guard."

Shirou nodded, and the two of them got off the bicycle. As they approached, Shirou then realized that he had seen this man before. It was the samurai from the Ryuudou Temple gate, whom Sonic had taken a picture of. However, while the samurai in that photo had been playful and perhaps mocking, the Servant before them seemed almost solemn.

"Welcome, Master Emiya Shirou," Assassin greeted, nodding at them. "And to you, too, Servant Saber. It's a pleasure to meet you without that old bag's interference."

Saber stiffly nodded back, frowning at the memory of being Caster's slave. "Assassin...why are you here?"

Assassin sighed, "Unfortunately, my freedom from Caster was short-lived. While I hoped to spend a few days of freedom exploring this

modern world, the master of this house forced me under his control. And he's of a lower-class than Caster..."

So Caster had him under control, just like she did with Saber...wait, Shirou thought, If his Master is the head of the Matou household... than that means it's Sakura's grandfather, Zouken...

"We need to speak with him," Shirou said, "Let us pass."

Assassin shrugged. "As it happens, I have been instructed to let you pass," his eyes drifted towards Saber. "But... *only you*. Saber will have to stay outside to keep me company."

Saber straightened, clearly unhappy with this condition. There was no doubt that she would start a fight with Assassin then and there. However, Shirou felt it was better right now to be civil. That said, there was a chance that things wouldn't remain civil for long...

"Saber, it'll be fine," Shirou said, and her frown deepened. He sent her a telepathic message. *If things go wrong, I'll use a Command Seal to summon you.*

Although Saber clearly didn't like it, she decided to let Shirou have his way. The look she sent Assassin's way made it clear that if he started a fight, she would finish it... *decisively*. Shirou then ventured into the house, and as he went further in, the feeling of dread grew further. And then his communicator rang...

Back underneath Mt. Ryuudou, things weren't nearly as calm for the B-team. Rather than waiting for Tails and the others to quietly leave the mysterious "Desert Zone" (As Knuckles called it), the three dark warriors had moved onto the attack, and were doing a pretty good job of keeping the heroes on the defensive. The largest of the three, the man with the mantle, had summoned a chariot pulled by a pair of the most vicious-looking bulls ever born. The rumbles caused by their pulling the chariot sounded just as ominous as the worst of Dr. Eggman's combat machines on the rampage.

"Take this!" The charioteer bellowed, shooting a wave of pulsing energy from his sword. It left a small canyon of glass in the sand. Not very far away, Tails, running as fast as his feet and tails could carry him, gasped and leapt to the side to avoid it. He just barely avoided both the sword beam and the bulls. As the chariot passed him, Tails charged up a Spin Dash and cannoned directly into the rider's left shoulder. The rider grunted as Tails bounced off, but gave no other sign of discomfort.

Meanwhile, Amy, Bazett found themselves embroiled in battle with the man in the jumpsuit. He wielded two spears, one in each hand, and his speed was phenomenal. The girls spent most of their time trying to dodge his assaults, and any attempts to counter or strike an opening was easily blocked or dodged.

But without doubt, the most difficult and most dangerous of the three was the black knight. Illya set Berserker onto him, and it was all too clear that while Berserker probably had the strength advantage, the knight was too agile and coordinated, easily dodging and misdirecting the demigod's relentless assaults against him. Thankfully, Berserker's raw endurance and energy made up for the difference, but it was becoming obvious to anyone watching that the only reason the black knight hadn't killed Berserker again was because the demigod was now-immune to his weapon.

"Yah!" Amy cried as she jumped up from another of the spearman's strikes. However, the second spear soon followed, and she had to block it with her hammer. While the head of the hammer didn't break, the force sent Amy flying back a ways.

"Interesting," The black spearman said, "I wonder what that hammer is made from, to resist the *Gae Buidhe* and not break. Of course, it's obvious you lack the strength to make take advantage of that."

Bazett ran over and helped Amy out of the sand, while the pink Hedgehog glared at the spearman.

"Who *is* this jerk? And why am I getting this weird vibe that I should be dating him?" Amy demanded, "I'm only supposed to be getting that vibe for Sonic!"

Bazett knew what Amy was talking about. "He has a charm that makes himself more attractive. A weaker woman would be bowing at his feet." *But he called his spear the Gae Buidhe ...he couldn't be...*

The spearman's eyes narrowed. "I can see you understand the beauty that has haunted my very existence. If only the women in my past were so strong-willed..."

The spearman charged at the pair, but before he could get within striking range, the sand in front of him exploded. Knuckles burst out from the desert and hammered the spearman with an uppercut. The spearman recovered quickly enough, flipping into his feet as he landed back down.

"You caught me off-guard," the spearman remarked, spitting a bit of blood. "But now that you have exposed yourself..." He glanced at his right hand. It was empty.

Knuckles waved the gold spear while smiling cheekily. "Missing something?"

Spearman's eyes widened, then narrowed. "You...! Give that back!"

But Knuckles' grin merely widened. "You want it? *Come and get it*, " To the girls he said, "You two help Tails out, I'll join you as soon as I'm done with pretty-boy, here."

The spearman charged, and Knuckles tossed the stolen spear aside. Although his eye briefly followed the action and became enflamed because of it, he never changed direction. Once he was close enough, he jabbed his remaining spear at Knuckles-

-Who ducked under it and entered a Spin Dash and shot at his assailant. The spearman managed to twist around to avoid most of

the attack, although he got nicked in the side. His free hand went to his abdomen.

While Knuckles and the spearman fought, the black knight suddenly broke away from Berserker. Illya allowed herself a confident smirk, especially when she saw that the black knight had dropped the stone-ax.

"He's retreating because his weapon is useless!" the tiny Master declared, "Berserker! Don't let him escape!"

With a roar, Berserker scooped up his discarded weapon and charged at the black knight. But the black knight wasn't retreating- instead, it had been running to where Knuckles had tossed the spear. When the black knight grabbed the spear, the weapon took the same color scheme as Berserker's sword had when the black knight had took it. With a new weapon, the black knight effortlessly parried Berserker's attacks

before finally stabbing the demigod right in the heart. Illya was stunned at the loss of yet another of Berserker's lives. Her Servant was supposed to have been the strongest of all, but this strange warrior was making the corrupted form of Herakles look like a rank amateur.

Could...could Berserker actually lose this? Illya thought, getting worried.

"Ah, welcome, young man," Zouken greeted Shirou, "I am so glad you have come to visit me. I've been a bit lonely, lately. Both of my grandchildren seem to have other things they would rather do than keep me warm in the twilight of my age."

Shirou didn't believe for one second that the old man before him was either welcoming or lonely. There was so much energy in the air it made his hairs stand on end, and at the center of it was this shriveled husk of a human being. Shirou was soon wondering if the

man before him was even Sakura and Shinji's grandfather. For all he knew, Zouken could have been older.

"I'd like to know why there's so much raw Prana being generated from this house," Shirou said evenly, "And what exactly is happening to Sakura. I don't believe that it's a coincidence that her health is declining at the same time your house has become a spiritual bonfire."

Zouken smirked. "An excellent pair of questions. And the answer can be found a decade ago...no, perhaps even further back... did you know that the Holy Grail has not formed once, in the entire history of the Fuyuki Wars?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"I began to grow tired of it," Zouken looked briefly wistful, "So much violence and treachery...and nothing to show for it. So, it was during the Fourth War that I decided that the method established by the Einzbern Family needed to be corrected."

"Corrected?" Shirou did not like the sound of that, especially with everything that had happened lately.

"Waiting for all seven Servants to be killed before the Heaven's Feel could end wasn't working. Either the deadline would pass, or, more likely, the Einzbern's container for the Holy Grail would be destroyed partway through," Zouken went on, "But I had a revelation; what about a container that would gather the Servants on its own?"

"But crafting such a thing would be no easy feat. I would need a human base, with powerful Mage Circuits. And tragically, my own family line's Magecraft potential had begun to diminish. What a blessing it was that my one-time allies the Tohsakas had an abundance of potential successors!"

"What are you talking about?" Shirou asked, "What abundance?"

"The previous head of the Tohsaka Clan, Tokiomi, had given birth to not one, but two girls with remarkable Mage Circuits," Zouken explained, "Of course, that was a problem in of itself. Only one could inherit the Crest of the Mage's clan. Whole families had been destroyed due to in-fighting. It was fitting that our respective problems would solve each other. I had no worthy successors of my own, while Tokiomi only needed one. He kept his eldest, Rin, while bequeathing to me, the younger, Sakura."

Shirou stared, his eye hardening as he made the connection. "You used Sakura...as a human for your plans to take the Holy Grail."

"Yes...I can see that despite your half-assed teachings, you are not completely stupid," Zouken congratulated, "I took the essence of the Fourth War's Grail, the mud that spilled over, and used it to form a Crest Worm that I planted inside of Sakura. That Worm would be the seed that would grow into the Shadow being currently running amok in Fuyuki."

Shirou remembered hearing about Sakura's diminishing health, seeing how tired she looked. Sonic and Tails told him about what had happened when Eggman tried to kidnap her. He felt his rage grow at this caulous old man, the mummy who regarded an innocent child as nothing more than a stepping stone for his hunt for power. The only thing that kept Shirou from venting this fury through violence was that he needed more information. Information that could save Sakura.

"So, everything's been going according to your plan, is that it?" Shirou said, his voice laced with disgust. "The Shadow is out there, gathering power while destroying Sakura from within."

But at this, Zouken frowned. "Actually...there has been a complication.

"Yes, it is true that the Shadow is amassing the power needed to form the Grail, but how it manifested is not ideal. Originally, Sakura's mindset needed to be at the proper emotional depth in order to

awaken the Shadow. But, before her heart and mind could reach that state, an outside power rippled through Fuyuki's leylines and prematurely instigated the Shadow's awakening. It has now grown beyond my expectations."

"What do you mean, 'Beyond'?" Shirou asked. He already knew that the 'outside power' was Sonic and the Chaos Emeralds entering the universe.

"It stole one of those blasted Chaos Emeralds, and has harnessed its power to feed upon the remnants of the Fourth Grail," Zouken explained, "And the creatures it summons, rather than attacking the people, feed off of Fuyuki's leylines directly. It will summon the Grail soon."

"And...what will happened to Sakura if that happens?" Shirou asked, "She...this isn't going to be good for her, is it?"

"She will die, of course," Zouken shrugged, "As the Worm the Shadow sprang from is inside of her body, the power of the Grail destroy her functions, just as it did for the vessels prepared by the Einzbern Family."

"Stop it!" Shirou demanded, unable to take it anymore. "Put a stop to this, right now!"

"I told you, the Shadow has grown beyond my abilities," Zouken said, a bit irritated. "I was supposed to be able to influence its movements, but the personality it developed has rebelled against me."

"Then we have nothing left to talk about." Shirou said, turning around. He already had a good idea of where Sakura was, and now that he knew what the problem was, there was no point to staying around.

"That's what you think."

Shirou stopped. A buzzing filled the air. Turning back around, he saw that there was several disgusting insects fluttering in the air. Shirou sensed the Prana inside of them and realized that they were familiars. Zouken's familiars.

"It is true that I cannot control the Shadow, that does not mean there's nothing we can do about the problem," Zouken said, "From what I've observed, Sakura has... *some* influence over the actions of the Shadow. She just lacks the wherewithal to invoke it properly."

Shirou warily watched the Familiars. "And...what do you plan to do about that?"

A wicked smile grew on Zouken's face. "As it happens, there is one thing she cares about. One person whom she thinks about constantly. By threatening that individual, Sakura can be made to tame the Shadow."

"And...that person is...?" Shirou asked, having a bad feeling about the direction the conversation was taking.

"You."

"Hold still!" The dark charioteer bellowed as he attempted to run down Tails. He sent out another bolt of energy from his sword, which Tails dodged with a Spin Dash. As the fox rolled out of the way of the bulls, Bazett charged and landed a powerful flyin kick right in the rider's chest, but he shrugged it off, letting the woman fall into the sand.

"Tails, gimme a boost!" Amy called out, jumping into the air. Tails took to the sky and caught her by the hand. Swinging around, Tails hurled the pink Hedgehog at the chariot like a lightish red Olympic hammer. And Amy used *her* hammer to bludgeon the rider right in the jaw, almost nearly knocking him out of his chariot. He caught himself almost immediately, but before he could retaliate, Amy had already hopped off.

Bazett was both a bit jealous and impressed. Nothing she did, even with Rune-augmented strength, seemed to have any serious effect on the Dark Rider. But he continually was stymied by the attacks cast by Amy and Tails. Out of the corner of her eye, she could Knuckles managing to fight even with the Dark version of Lancer.

Perhaps it's their natural resistance to Magecraft, She thought, Or maybe they've used those Chaos Emeralds enough that they've become imbued with a bit of its energy...

Still, this was a stalemate that was not going to last. The three dark warriors were unrelenting foes with seemingly inexhaustible stamina. And the Dark Knight was still tossing Berserker around like a rag doll. They needed an edge. Something that would tilt the balance of the battle their way...

Just then, there was the sound of rushing wind as multiple projectiles filled the air. These bolts of energy flew towards the dark warriors, almost as fast as Sonic could run. "Holy cow!" Knuckles cried, diving into the sand as one bolt flew over his head.

With a sneer, the dark spearman moved to block the attack headed his way. Instead of slapping it aside, the projectile seemed to explode in his face. With his speed, the dark spearman was able to avoid the majority of the damage. As he did, Knuckles burst out from the sand and once again hammered the spearman with an uppercut. This time, the spearman was ready, and he rolled back from the punch as best he could, and as he flipped, kicked Knuckles in the chin, sending him sprawling into the sand. From his new position, Knuckles saw a red-clad figure leaping through the air, with a smaller person riding piggy-back.

"Hey, Archer! Rin!" Knuckles called out, "Did you do that?! Watch it! You almost hit me!"

The pair didn't respond to Knuckles at all, but even more troubling was that none of the dark warriors were particularly interested in

stopping them. The dark knight glanced at Rin, but quickly jumped over a charge from Berserker.

"You're just letting them through?" Tails asked as he rolled out of the chariot's way.

"They have permission from our Master," the charioteer thundered, "She wishes for her sister's presence in our final hours."

"Sister?" Tails repeated, mulling it over. It then hit him. He shot into the air and shouted, "Sakura! *Rin!* Is Sakura back there?!"

Rin gave no sign that she heard Tails, save for burying her face against Archer's back.

Are you sure about this, Rin? Archer asked his Master through their telepathic bond.

I've made up my mind, Archer, Rin replied firmly. *This is my responsibility.*

Archer did not reply. He had already known what Rin had decided. That didn't make what they were about to do any easier.

Tails watched as Archer and Rin faded into the distance, practically vanishing. Before he could dwell on it, he heard a noise and realized that the chariot was making another charge at him. Rather than fly away, he stopped spinning his tails and fell down, just in time for the chariot to pass over him. Hitting the sand, Tails immediately went into a Spin Dash and tried to accelerate after Archer and Rin. Before he could make much distance, the dark spearman was in his path, kicking the fox back.

"That is where the Main Event is taking place. We did not say *you* have the right to go through," He said, giving Tails a look of scorn and consternation. "Wait out here with the rest of the sideshow."

Tails gritted his teeth, glaring up at the spearman. *Sonic, where are you!?*

Shirou felt a bead of sweat run down his forehead. The swarm of Zouken's Familiars had him pinned to the floor. While they weren't burrowing into his skin, Shirou could still feel his Mana being slowly drained from his body.

"I won't kill you, boy," Zouken said, "I need you alive to motivate Sakura to control the Shadow. But you won't be going anywhere else until this situation is...rectified."

Shirou had a snappy retort loaded, but his words became scattered in the wind that suddenly rushed in, along with the swarm. There was a grinding noise that was already very dear to Shirou's ears. He got up, and saw Sonic standing in the center of squashed bugs.

"And *then* you'll kill him?" Sonic asked sarcastically.

"You...!" Zouken's eyes widened and then narrowed, "How did you get past Assassin?"

"Like all magic ghosts, he's got some unfinished business." Sonic replied with a smirk.

Angry, Zouken sent a telepathic command to the Fake Assassin. *Faker! Why didn't you stop this pest from getting in?*

Unfortunately, "Master", defeating Saber is proving to be more of a challenge than you believed, Fake Assassin retorted almost airily, And your new problem just stepped on my head.

" *Trace On.* "

Shirou Projected Archer's swords, prepared for another round, but Sonic held up his hand.

"Shirou, I'll handle the evil wizard," Sonic said, "You find the Chaos Emerald."

Shirou nodded. If Sakura wasn't here, then the source of the energy in the Manor was clearly an Emerald. If Zouken was tapping into its power, then getting would be the key to winning this battle.

"You won't be going anywhere," Zouken said firmly, "If I have to subdue you both-"

Before he could finish, Sonic launched at him, spinning like a buzz-saw fired from a shotgun. Upon impact Zouken's decrepid form exploded.

"Whoa, gross!" Sonic gagged, wiping any residue from his fur.

Almost immediately, Zouken's body reconstituted, only now the ancient mage seemed rather amused.

"Do you really think your little tricks can defeat me, Sonic?" Zouken taunted, "I have long since given up my humanity."

Sonic shrugged. "Eh. I've faced worse."

Shirou raced down the halls, checking each door. But none of the rooms he looked into showed anything. They all looked like ordinary, unused rooms you would find in a typical house of this type. But Shirou could feel the tingle in his nerves, telling him that there was a Chaos Emerald somewhere.

There's no way a Mage would leave something as powerful and dangerous as a Chaos Emerald just lying around, Shirou thought as he ran, He'd most likely keep it in his workshop, hidden so no one else can get it. But where that workshop is...!

Shirou stopped. Holding out his hand, he Projected the Rulebreaker.

An ordinary miser would hide an ordinary gem with a hidden panel, He determined, But a Mage would use Magecraft to hide a supernatural jewel. If this dagger of Caster's can break a contract between a Master and Servant, or a Mage and their thrall...

Shirou plunged the tip of the Rulebreaker into the floor of the Manor. In ordinary circumstances, what he was hoping to do wouldn't work. But Zouken had been bolstering his power with the Chaos Emerald. That unstable power not only increased his strength, but also its vulnerability to counters.

Either way, it worked. The tingling that he was getting from the entire property vanished, but he could still pick up a faint sensation from deeper within.

That's right, it must be underneath the house, Shirou determined, moving. And now that I've shut down this Manor's Boundary Field, getting to it should be easy! As long as Sonic is keeping Zouken busy...

Another swarm of Familiars flew at Sonic, but he easily rolled out of the way and Homing Shot at Zouken. However, instead of reconstituting itself, the decrepid body just disintergrated.

Sonic did not believe for a second that the old mummy was beaten. It felt too easy. He looked around, tapping his foot anxiously. "Where'd that old geezer go?" He replayed the scene in his mind.

And then he did it again in slow-motion.

And that's when he realized. Zouken didn't just vanish...the bugs consisting his body had flown away instead of reassembling.

"Darn it!" Sonic cried, bursting into a run.

Outside, a duel between western and eastern swordsmen continued on.

"It seems you are less frenzied than you had been before, Saber," Assassin remarked, "Do you feel that all you need to do is keep me occupied before the little fellow and your Master return?"

"Don't be so insulting, Assassin," Saber retorted, "I was worried about my Master's life before. But now that he has Sonic to support him, I can focus on defeating you at my own pace."

Of course, from an outsider's perspective, neither Saber nor Assassin were fighting leisurely. Their blades clashed with such speed and ferocity that an audience would have only seen a series of blurs and heard a repeated screeching.

Saber was more thankful to Sonic than Assassin could have guessed. Constantly trying to keep up with his super-fast movements had increased her own reaction time, allowing Saber to better fight against Assassin. She could only wonder how dangerous an opponent the samurai would be without that informal training.

At Saber's words, Assassin's eyes narrowed. "Oh, so if you don't have to worry about your Master, I'm an easy opponent...?"

Assassin's time in the Fifth Holy War wasn't a good one, if he were to be honest. First, summoned as a false Servant for Caster, and bound to the Ryuudou Temple for the majority of the time in the physical world. And even after he was freed, he then found himself enslaved to an even more foul Master. All he had left for his honor was his skill with the sword. And now that was being disregarded as well.

" *Tsubame Gaeshi!* "

Saber was not fully aware of what had happened. It seemed as if Assassin had cut his sword in three different ways *at the same time* .

It was if there were three swords coming at her. It would be impossible to defend against.

" *Mana Burst!* "

Calling upon her energy reserves to bolster her abilities, Saber shifted on her feet and rocketed away from Assassin's attack. Behind where she had been standing, several trees became perfectly cut lumber. Assassin turned to regard Saber.

"That was my special technique," Assassin explained, "In my life, I attempted to cut down a swallow. But swallows are almost impossible to catch for a single sword strike. I had nothing better to do, so I practiced until I could make three strikes in the same breath. I assure you, I am not someone you can leisurely take your time against."

In a single breath...no, that attack was a total refraction of the dimensions! Saber thought, and then said, "I was not making light of you, Sasaki Koujiro. And I will say it again; Now that I know my Master is safe, I can give you the full focus I need to defeat you."

Assassin smirked. "Very good."

It took a bit of searching, but Shirou finally found it. A secret door leading down to what could only be described as a dungeon. Blocky stairs inside of damp, dark pits. If the Einzbern Castle's inner sanctum were sleek yet imposing, the recesses of Matou Manor were foreboding, perhaps more than Kotomine's church. It was like being in the stomach of a hungry beast.

But there it was. By following the sensations in his Mage Circuits, Shirou found the Chaos Emerald, incased in a glass box and surrounded by more Crest Worms. They were disgusting to watch as they squirmed, but Shirou focused on the gem's light.

That case doesn't look very strong, Shirou thought as he approached it, I can break it and then we can head to Ryuudou...

Shirou had been so focused on the Chaos Emerald's energy that he didn't notice a mass of Prana suddenly forming behind him. He *did* see the Crest Worms that had gathered around Emerald surge towards him. Shirou stumbled back in alarm, but before he could do anything he was once more pinned to the floor by Zouken's insects.

"I think that is close enough," The ancient Mage stated coolly, "It is time we ended this. I'll have Saber destroy herself by threatening to kill you, while False Assassin can destroy Sonic."

"Hey, gramps!"

Something blue streaked by Shirou. It rammed into Zouken, sending the ancient Mage tumbling backwards. As he did, Shirou felt the crest worms holding him down Disintegrate. Getting up, Shirou saw Sonic standing over Zouken, casually tossing a Chaos Emerald up into the air. As for the Matou patriarch, he seemed to be convulsing wildly, as if suffering the mother of all heart attacks. The big yellow gem sticking of his head, jammed roughly between his left eye and forehead, probably wasn't helping.

"Whhaaatt...haaave...yooouuu...donnne?" Zouken gasped out.

Shirou went over and looked down at Zouken. While he didn't fall any pity for the pain Shinji's grandfather was undoubtedly in, he was a little confused about was happening.

"You hit him with a Chaos Emerald?" Shirou asked Sonic.

Sonic flashed Shirou of his trademark grins. "Nope. Remember that party favor we made for Caster?"

Zouken began to crackle and give off sparks like a live wire. Smoke began to fill the air. Shirou gasped as it all came together. Sonic had used the Anti Emerald! And the energy of a regular Chaos Emerald

was damaging enough on its own...what would the added power of an oppositely-charged one do to Zouken?

"Last time I used one, it caused one of Eggman's weapons to blow up, big time," Sonic added, "So...we should probably go."

Shirou needed no more prompting. Turning on his heels, he Reenforced his legs and broke into a run, with Sonic jogging next to him. Not long after they started fleeing, they ran into Saber.

"Shirou! Are you all right?" She asked.

"I am. What happened with Assassin?" Shirou responded.

"He abandoned the duel," She answered, looking about warily. "What is happening here?"

"The old man is about to explode," Sonic told her, "Bunch together, because we are outta here!"

Saber took Shirou's hand, and Shirou took Sonic's. Sonic held up the Chaos Emerald and it's light began to shine...

"Chaos Control!"

...And they were gone.

Meanwhile, Zouken found himself in cycle of constant torment. Despite his best attempts to stop it, the Crest Worms consisting his body greedily consumed the power of the gem Sonic had stabbed him with. It was delicious, but painful, like a drug that gave a high and crashed at the same time. It destroyed his body while simultaneously rebuilding it. The sheer pain sent Zouken's mind afire as he tried to suppress it. But he could not. As he felt the inevitable come, the head of the Matou Clan tried to see his life flash before his eyes, but all he saw was the sneering face of Shinji, that powerless brat that had the nerve to defy him. Shinji's gutless expression soon

morphed, becoming the cocky but confident smile of Sonic the Hedgehog.

As his body began to bulge, Matou Zouken moaned one last sentence.

"lililili...haaaaatte...thaaaat...hedgehoooooggg..."

The explosion could be heard for miles around. The blast shook the surrounding neighborhood. When authorities and people came to investigate, all they found was a sizable crater with burnt pieces of an ancient house scattered about. Many would theorize why the Matou Manor suddenly exploded. Some believed it was the same vandal to started the Great Fire of Fuyuki. Others would claim the culprit **Tiger** was *clearly* that insane terrorist, Dr. Eggman. Only four people would know what happened that day, and only two would understand.

But for three of them, the battle against Zouken's schemes had just begun.

To Be Continued

Tiger Dojo

Taiga: HYYYYYAAAAA! Welcome, students, to the Tiger Dojo! I am your instructor, Fujimura Taiga! Gao!

Illya: And here is the Number One Student, Illya!

Taiga: We are winding down the "Heaven's Feel" arc! Next chapter will be the last one! I am sure you all have questions, but we will only be able to answer a few. Our first question comes from Dr. Pierceman, who asks, "Why did Zouken explode?" Don't you remember *Sonic Adventure 2* ? When Sonic used that anti-Emerald on the Eclipse Cannon, that also caused it to blow up!

Illya: Although he tried to dilute as much of it as possible, Zouken still absorb quite a bit of his Chaos Emerald's power. And so, the reaction when he was struck by the Anti Emerald in this story was identical to the one used in the game. Kaboom!

Taiga: Next question! From Hirushoten; "How was Berserker hurt?" I guess you are referring to his battle with the Black Knight, aren't you... Hmm, how could any attack pierce his unbreakable skin...? Well, whenever that Knight grabs something, it seems to change color, could that be related?

Illya: Grrr...that sketchy Knight is so smug! I bet Avenger gave him an upgrade with the Chaos Emerald he stole! If they were both normal Servants, Berserker would crush him!

Taiga: Now, for our final question. Dean Campbell asks, "The events of Fate Genesis happens before or after the battle against Black Doom?" I think...after.

Illya: "Fate Genesis" takes place after the events of "Sonic Colors", which happened long after "Shadow the Hedgehog", so definately.

Taiga: And that's the end of the Q/A! I will see you at the next practice!

Illya: See you soon!

Leave That Sword For Now

Chapter 22: Leave That Sword for Now

It was *not* the temple Caster built.

When Rin and Archer left the (desert? Special Zone? Reality Marble?) area the Dark Warriors were protecting, they found themselves in some sort of maze made from a malleable substance. It reacted to being touched, and when Archer tried to mark a path, the scratch he made with his sword would undo itself, like a wound being healed instantly.

It's like we're in the bowels of some monster, Archer thought, and realized that could very well be accurate. "Rin, this isn't working. I think we're just going in circles."

Rin stopped, and he followed suit. She rubbed her chin, deep in thought.

"Those guards in the desert let us pass, even though Tails and Berserker couldn't break through," She determined, "Why?"

"Maybe they wanted to get in," Archer said sarcastically, but then considered it seriously. "This is a trap. Whatever's controlling this... whatever we're in could be trying to wear us down, so they can finish us off once we're weak enough."

"But why us?" Rin asked again, "Why not do that to the rest of them? What about us is so important to the mastermind that they would go to this effort?"

The answer came to Archer in an instant. "Who do you think is being hidden here?"

Rin gasped as she realized it too. "Sakura...!"

"You are correct." A voice whispered, "But also, incorrect."

Archer and Rin whirled about. Standing behind them was a tall, imposing, and downright *bizarre* man. He was draped in robes of a color similar to the dark warriors, and his eyes were so wide and open that they looked like they should have belonged to a fish. In his hands, tight and muscular, was a book with a cover that was... trembling.

Rin hissed in recognition. "You...!"

The man continued to speak. "The Holy Maiden has need to see you. Her guardian spirit has been guiding your journey through this place. But she is not trying to stymie you. No, she only wishes to meet with you *alone*. Your Servant cannot follow."

"Not going to happen," Archer said, stepping in front of Rin. "Only a fool would walk through the enemy's home unaided."

The fish-eyed man did not respond. Instead, from behind him, four tentacles sprang out and launched themselves at Archer. Archer, having already Projected his swords, was quick to slice them into ribbons, and then threw *Kansho* at the fish-eyes. Before the sword could connect, some sort of *creature* leapt out from behind Fish-eyes and blocked the attack. Out from the walls came more such creatures, abominations like the ones that had been stalking the streets at night.

Great... Archer thought bitterly, Projecting a replacement *Kansho*. *Looks like we can't get through without beating him...Rin, stay.* No reply. *Rin...?*

Archer did a quick check and realized that Rin was no longer in the chamber with him. He shot Fish-Eyes a murderous glare.

"What did you do!?" Archer barked.

"I did nothing," Fish-Eyes stated, "But as I have said, the Holy Maiden wishes to see your Master one last time..."

"And is not the purpose of this War to grant a wish?"

"Funny..." Archer had his swords go into Overdrive, "That's not how I remember it." *Be careful, Rin...*

Rin wasn't sure what had happened. Just when Archer began fighting that...(Man? Monster?), the ground opened up and *literally* swallowed her. It felt disgusting. She now knew what a piece of food felt when it down her throat.

She blamed herself for being caught off-guard. While she had never seen him in person, after sometime after the Fourth War she had grilled the Fake Priest about the Caster, if only so she could put a face to whoever had killed her classmates. While he never gave her a name to the Heroic Spirit, he had mentioned some of his features, like his fish-eyes.

Fish-Eyes!

And in her few moments of righteous anger, the trap had been sprung. Now Rin was separated from her Servant. And while she could summon him to her side with a Command Seal, she knew he would have to deal with Caster if she had any chance of fixing the situation.

(*And just how are you going to fix it?* A voice that sounded too much like Kotomine whispered in her mind).

Before Rin could give more thought to the issue, a faint glow caught her attention. She realized that the chamber she was in was far larger than the last one. And in the very center of it was some sort of fixture, like a mix between a cradle and a cocoon. It seemed to be made of hundreds of dark tendrils that had grown from the floor,

woven together. It emitted a light that seemed to constantly shift between red and purple. And lying in it...

...was *Sakura*.

But this wasn't the Sakura Rin remembered seeing at school, or at Emiya's. Instead of her uniform or casual dress, Sakura was wearing a dark substance like a dress made of scales. Her hair was bone white. Faint red lines could be seen near her eyes. Eyes that were closed, as if asleep.

Rin swallowed. This was it. She took out the Azoth Sword. She began to walk.

All of the Prana holding this entire lair up is coming from Sakura...
She thought, *If I cut off the source...*

Suddenly, Rin wasn't under Ryuudou. She was at the playground, watching her mother break down telling Uncle Kariya about Sakura...

Rin shook the memory from her mind. Even then, she understood why father had did what he did. It was for both their sakes. As Mages.

But as Rin tried to move on, her mind changed the setting. Now, she was at school, saving Emiya's life to keep Sakura happy...

Rin gritted her teeth. Shirou had been an unwitting casualty, killed by Lancer for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It had no bearing on the present matter...

But then Rin was back at her family's mansion, being stared down by Sonic and Tails. Their disappointed eyes as they stared past her justifications and into her soul.

What do they know!? Rin told herself again, *They're just outsiders, they have no right to criticize! This is how things are done!*

But Tails' voice cut into her thoughts, "*It seems like you're going out of your way to be hurt, just to please some people that aren't around anymore.*"

Rin took another step. But it was hard to do. Somehow, her legs had become like lead. She tried to think back on her father's lectures. Everything both he and Kotomine had to teach her about Magecraft and the workings of Mages. To remind herself of her duties as a Tohsaka Mage.

But all her mind could summon were those times she constantly bickered with Sonic and Shirou over the War. Eating dinner with the group. And breakfast. Flying in the *Tornado* with Tails. Playing with Sakura at the park while mother watched...

Rin felt her hands go numb. The Azoth Sword fell from her grip. It landed blade-first into the floor.

Sakura's eyes shot open. They were red, like blood. Sakura turned her head, and fixed Rin with a look that held no emotion. But, even still, the expression the younger girl held was inviting, challenging... and ominous.

And then, Sakura's entire body convulsed once, and Sakura's eyes shut once more.

"...Sakura?"

"Berserker...?" Illya whispered.

But the giant did not respond. His headless body just laid there in the sand, dissolving into a cascade of sparkling light. Once his corpse had vanished, Illya felt it. The presence of one more Servant entering the Holy Grail. The Heroic Spirit Herakles was dead.

The Dark Knight stood over where Berserker had been. In his hand was Amy's hammer, now painted the same shade as his armor. He

was joined by the Dark Spearman, and the Dark Charioteer. Opposite of the three Dark Warriors, the remainder of the group gathered at Illya's side.

"What happened to Berserker?" Tails asked, "I thought he was supposed to be invincible or something."

"He...he's supposed to be immune to any weapon below A-Rank," Illya explained, still shaking from the loss. "But...that knight... everything that knight picked up became a high-ranked weapon! Even that stupid hammer!"

"And he knew how to use them," Knuckles muttered, glancing about. "When he knocked that big guy out of his car, he drove it like a champion gladiator."

Illya gritted her teeth. The image of her Servant being run down like just another pedestrian was not how she wanted to remember Berserker.

"We need to rethink our plans," Bazett said, "Those three aren't going to let us through, no matter what. But they aren't interested in chasing after us otherwise. We should retreat for now, and come back later."

"We can't!" Tails protested, "Rin got ahead of us! There's no telling what could happen to her! If we don't get through, she might die!"

"We don't have a choice," Bazett responded, "That girl shouldn't have rushed ahead on her own, even if she had a Servant. We don't live in a world where reckless behavior is allowed."

"But..."

"Hey, shut up!" Knuckles barked, "You feel that?"

Across the way, the Dark Knight stirred. He began to shake.

"Art....hur...?"

A crackling sound filled the air. Sparks of lightning appeared in a clear sky. There was a flash of light, and Sonic, Shirou and Saber fell into the sand.

"Umf!" Sonic hit the desert face-first. Pushing himself up, he spat out a mouthful of grains. "Why do I always land on my beautiful face?"

Shirou shielded his eyes from the glare of the desert sun. "Was it this bright before we went into the house...wait, are we in a desert?"

"Sonic! Shirou!" Tails cried, flying over. "You made it!"

Sonic grinned and gave Tails a thumb's up. "Wouldn't miss it for the world! But what's with the sand box?"

As Tails filled Sonic and Shirou in on the current situation, Saber stared. The three figures barring their way stared back. Her expression turned dire as painful memories came rushing back to her.

"No..." She whispered, "This can't be possible...how is it that they've returned?"

"What?" Amy asked, "You know those guys?"

"...Yes," Saber said mournfully, "I know them quite well. They were my opponents in the Fourth Holy Grail War. I don't understand how, but...those three men are Servants I've fought."

"What?!" Everyone looked at Saber in shock.

"Those guys are Servants?! No wonder they're so tough!" Tails exclaimed.

"Did you figure out their identities?" Bazett asked.

"...Yes..." Saber tried to compose herself, but it was obvious to the rest that this was still affecting her. "The largest man once tried to

conquer the world...Although you now call him Alexander the Great, he is Iskander, the King of Conquerors, the Servant Rider.

"The man with two spears is a hero from the legend of Fenian Cycle; Diarmuid Ua Duibhne, the Servant Lancer.

'And the man in armor..." Saber swallowed, shaking. "He was... *is*... one of my greatest knights when I ruled Camelot...Sir Lancelot of the Lake...Berserker!"

Illya's eyes sharpened. "That knight is a Berserker, too?!"

Shirou stared at his Servant. *So she had to fight someone who was once a dear comrade...no wonder this is hard for her.*

"But, why are they *here*? " Knuckles asked, "I thought all the Servants for the War were already summoned?"

But Shirou already had an answer. "The Shadow was created using the mud from the Fourth War's Grail. If he's involved, that would explain how these Servants came back..." He glanced across the way. "They don't seem pretty happy to see us, in any case."

That was an understatement. Dark Rider's expression was dark already, but his eyes had narrowed by such a degree that they were pinpricks. Dark Berserker seemed to have gone completely still. And Dark Lancer...

Eyes twitching. Hands shaking, gripping his spears so hard that if not for their supernatural nature, they would have snapped in two. He seemed to be positively frothing at the mouth.

"You...so you've finally returned, eh Saber!?" Dark Lancer hissed.

"So the Shadow wasn't lying," Dark Rider noted, "Still, judging from her entrance, I imagine her coming wasn't on purpose. Still a coward, pushing people away."

Dark Berserker titled his head. He looked from Saber, to Sonic. "Ar...thur?"

Back with the heroes, Saber noticed an absence. "Illyasviel, where is your Berserker?"

Illya gritted her teeth and fought back tears. "He killed him...that other Berserker killed my Herakles! He moved like an expert martial artist! Even though he's supposed to be a Berserker!"

Shirou and Sonic were amazed to hear this. To them, Berserker was an unstoppable juggernaut, a force of nature in human-shape. What kind of man could kill him on his own?

But Saber was not surprised. She knew her knight. "That's understandable. Even when consumed by the Mad Enhancement, Lancelot is so skilled with that he can keep his mind steady in battle. And he can make anything he gets his hands his Noble Phantasm."

"So what about the other two?" Bazett asked, "What are their powers?"

"Lancer's Noble Phantasms are his spears," Saber explained, "The gold one is *Gae Buidhe* ; Any wound it makes won't heal as long as that spear exists. The red one is *Gae Dearg* , which can cut through Mana."

"What?! That's too cheap!" Amy cried, "I call hax! Hax!"

"As for Rider's Noble Phantasm..." Saber looked about, "We're currently inside of it. "

"What?!" Knuckles eyes darted frantically, "Inside?!"

Bazett was thunderstruck as she realized the implications. "A Reality Marble!"

"A what?" Tails asked. The land began to shake.

"Think of it as a enclosed dimension, generated by a Mage and shaped by their soul," Illya explained, "But, still, it's kinda plain for something created by a guy calling himself a King of Conquerors."

"This is just the beginning," Saber said, tensing. "In here, *Ionioi Hetairoi* , Rider can summon an army to wipe out whatever foe he has. But why haven't they appeared...?"

Shirou looked behind and blanched. "Uh, they have."

Turning around, the group saw it. The force coming at them was no mere "army." Instead, it was a massive flood of soldiers. All armed, all strong, and all determined. They charged without hesitation, their only goal being the destruction of whatever lay ahead of them.

"Do you remember, Saber!?" Dark Rider boomed, flying above the army in his *Gordius Wheel* chariot. "The brief display I showed you at your Master's castle, the obliteration of Assassin, was but a tickle compared to what awaits you here! So smug you were in how you pushed aside your comrades, now you face the power of my eternal allies, bound to me for all eternity!"

"Uh, those guys look pretty tough," Amy said worriedly, holding up her hammer. "But they're just ordinary soldiers, right?"

"No," Saber unsheathed sword, "Some of them are Heroic Spirits. This could be our last-" She gasped and whirled about. " *Battle!* "

Saber brought up her sword, releasing the Invisible Air that cloaked its length and shape, just in time to block both spears wielded by Dark Lancer. He had charged at her with so much speed that their clash created a small explosion of force that knocked everyone else away.

"Do not worry about them, Saber!" Dark Lancer snarled, his face almost beastly. "By the time that army is even halfway across, I will already have my revenge!"

Dark Lancer began to thrust his spears at Saber rapidly, which she immediately parried. They moved so quickly that immediate space around them became too dangerous to approach, for fear of getting impaled or cut by their sacred blades. Unlike the duel against Assassin, who was cool-headed, there was a sorrow and rage in Saber and Dark Lancer's battle, a desperation not yet seen in the Holy War.

"Saber!" Shirou shouted, wanting to get involved, yet also knowing he couldn't.

"Do not approach, Shirou!" Saber yelled over the screech of blades. "Focus on saving yourself!" *Having said that, how can they do that? My Noble Phantasm is the only thing with the power to wipe out Rider's army, but I can't do that with Lancer attacking me. Perhaps if I were to position him with his back towards Rider...*

"I'm coming, Saber!" Sonic cried, preparing to run. But before he could he reach Saber, Dark Berserker landed in front of him. "Whoa!"

"*Arthurr!*" Dark Berserker roared, before pausing. "Ar...thurr?" He looked back at Saber, then to Sonic. "Arthurr?"

Oh, man! This armored chump can't tell the difference between me and Saber, just 'cause we were both King Arthur! Sonic realized, *Might as well roll with it! Saber's got her hands full!*

Sonic wagged his finger at Dark Berserker, saying, "That's right, Sir Lancelot! It's me, your king! And you should be *ashamed* of what you pulled with Guinevere!"

Dark Berserker howled in fury, and lunged at Sonic. Rather than actually fight back, Sonic zipped just out of the black knight's reach. And did so again. And again. It was incredibly comical to look at, a fearsome corrupted Servant diving after the speedy Hedgehog. It was like a cat chasing the beam from a laser-pointer.

"That's right!" Sonic shouted, "Follow the Blue Blur! You cur!"

Knuckles slapped his forehead. "Look at Mr. Speed-demon having fun, almost as if we didn't have a *flipping army* about to step on us!"

But strangely, Shirou did not feel concerned with the ensuing threat. Not just because he was too worried about Saber's battle. Or Sonic's. For some reason, the threat of Dark Rider's army held no meaning to him. There was a faint idea brewing in his mind. A connection, a faint line, began to be drawn between memories and experience.

Rider's army...are full of Heroic Spirits.

They are his Servants.

A Servant is controlling Servants.

Just like Caster did...

Caster...had the power to break the bind between Servants and their Masters...

... And I can copy that.

Shirou looked up at Dark Rider, flying in his chariot. The solution presented himself in his mind. Now, all he had to do was bring it into the world.

I Am the Bone of my _

Shirou held out his hand, and in a flash it was filled by a bow. He held out his other hand, and in it the Rule Breaker appeared.

"Maybe we should run," Tails had suggested off to the side, "We need to get out of here and help Rin and Sakura."

"I don't think we can reach the exit before that force catches us," Bazett pointed out, "And not all of us can move at light-speed."

"Well, we can't just wait for them to hit us..."

A sharp 'twang' cut their argument short. Shirou had let the bowstring go, with the bow pointed high into the air. They stared at him.

"Don't worry," Shirou assured them with a faint smile. "I've got this in hand...I hope."

High in the air, Dark Rider grunted as something struck him in the chest. Whatever hit him had barely tapped his body, and now lay at his feet. Reaching down and picking it up, he regarded the crooked dagger. Looking down from his elevated place, he glowered at Shirou, who still had his bow in hand.

The ground shook as Dark Rider landed right in front of Shirou. He held out the Rule Breaker. "Is this some sort of joke, boy?" He thundered, "This is a battle between kings! Toys like this-" He snapped the Rule Breaker's blade, and threw the dagger aside. "-are not even worth bringing to the battlefield! If you are going to challenge your betters, have the decency to make an effort!"

Shirou did not respond. Instead, he just smiled, faintly. Nearby, Sonic and Dark Berserker ran past them.

And that enraged Dark Rider even more. "Well!? What do you have to say for yourself?! *I could break you in two!* "

"...You and what army?" Shirou asked finally.

"What? *That* ar-" Dark Rider pointed, but his words died in his mouth as he looked. All he could see was the vast, empty sands. The strongest army, lead by the Alexander the Great, had vanished. "Where did they go? Where are my followers!?"

"Gone," Shirou explained, "That 'toy' you so easily dismissed...was a Mystic Code meant to sever magical contracts. The bond between your soldiers, which allowed you to call them here...I broke it."

A vein appeared on Dark Rider's forehead. "You...!"

If Dark Rider had any words to say, he was cut off as Knuckles and Bazett suddenly launched a punch and kick respectively into his sides. They followed with upward strikes to his chin, and Dark Rider stumbled back in pain. Shirou didn't hesitate Projecting Archer's swords, rushing towards Dark Rider to attack.

Spotting this, Dark Lancer shot Saber a poisonous look. "I see your new Master has just as much honor as your last," He snarled, "Resorting to cheap tricks with no regards to a warrior's chivalry."

Saber knew what Dark Lancer referred to, and remembered that moment. When her then-Master Kiritsugu interrupted her duel with Diarmuid by forcing his Master to use a Command Seal and have Lancer commit suicide. And to add insult to injury, he killed the Master shortly afterwards. It had been a huge affront to a warrior's honor, and enough to convince Saber that her Kiritsugu was a man unfit to be her Master.

Saber gritted her teeth. "What Kiritsugu did back then was cold and cruel, of that I will not deny. But do not judge Shirou by those standards!"

With anger on Shirou's behalf burning, Saber fought harder. Off to the side, Sonic continued to run circles around Dark Berserker. While the black knight may have been the most skilled fighter in the desert, and even retained his weapons proficiency while consumed by the Mad Enhancement, he just wasn't fast enough to catch Sonic. With an guttural growl, he threw himself once more at the Hedgehog. Before Sonic could move, Tails swooped in and pulled him into the air.

"We can't stick around, Sonic!" Tails said, "Those three let Rin go ahead. I think she might be walking into a trap!"

Sonic thought about what Archer told him. "Might be. Let me down, I just gotta do one thing, and we can split."

Tails threw Sonic back down, and the minute he hit the sand, Sonic went into a Spin Dash. His spinning form began to sink, and Dark Berserker, only seeing that his target was no longer moving, charged to catch him. Just as the black knight was almost on top of Sonic, the Hedgehog released the Spin Dash, grinding a small trench into the sand. Sonic, still in Spinball mode, circled around Dark Berserker repeatedly, digging deeper and deeper. After maybe 20 laps (Done in the space of 7 seconds, no less) Sonic leapt into the air and delivered a Homing Shot onto Dark Berserker. As Sonic's form struck Dark Berserker's head, the impact caused the ground, already unstable from the trench, to collapse, trapping Dark Berserker.

"That should do it," Sonic commented, and waved at Tails. "Let's go, Tails!"

As the duo took off, Illya looked to where Dark Berserker had been buried. Already the dark knight was digging his way out of the sand. Making clawing motions with her hands, she created a large cage from magic threads and dropped it over Dark Berserker. It probably wouldn't hold for very long, but every second counted. Amy Rose suddenly leapt down from above and struck the cage, hammering it further down on the black knight. the pink Hedgehog gave Illya a thumb's up, and the homunculous nodded back.

"Guys!" Sonic called out to the others, "Tails and I are gonna get Rin and Sakura! We'll be back ASAP!"

"Take your time!" Knuckles shouted back, "We've got this under-WHOA!"

Knuckles, Shirou, and Bazett dove out of the way as the *Gordius Wheel* swooped down at them, nearly trampling the three under the hooves of its bulls. Projecting a bow, Shirou fired a slew of Projected arrows at Dark Rider, only to be deflected by the Conqueror's sword. In retaliation, Dark Rider shot a blast of energy from his sword, forcing the Master to run to avoid it. As he did, Knuckles suddenly came up and gave him a solid right hook to the jaw.

"Damn you!" Dark Rider grunted in pain, "Fight fair!"

"This from the guy who needed a whole army to fight for him?" Knuckles remarked.

Dark Rider snarled and slashed at Knuckles, who didn't move in time. Rings exploded from the Echidna's body and Knuckles fell from the chariot. Recovering quickly, Knuckles managed to snag at least three Rings before the rest vanished.

"Are you all right?" Shirou asked, helping him up.

"I'm fine, but that guy can really take a hit!" Knuckles said.

Saber spotted Sonic and Tails leave the Realty Marble, and allowed herself a smile. She jumped away from Dark Lancer as he attempted to skewer her. He shot after Saber, circling around to take her back. Saber whirled to cut block his strike with the gold spear.

"I thought you were supposed to guard this point." Saber questioned, "Are you going to disregard your duty to your master?"

Dark Lancer's eyes flashed. "I only accepted the role of guard dog for one reason; to finish the duel we began ten years ago! The battle our so-called Masters cheated us out of! I have waited too long for this vengeance!"

He's unhinged by anger and spite, and yet, he's still able to maintain his skills a warrior, Saber thought, beginning to get a bit worried. Fighting him was hard enough when I was Kiritsugu's Servant, but with Shirou's smaller Mana reserves...

A yellow glint caught her eye, and Saber broke away from Dark Lancer. Snagging the source, she marveled at the golden hoop in her fingers. It sank into her body, and Saber felt a bit of her energy be restored. She looked around, and saw other such rings floating in the air.

Power Rings! Why are they here? Saber wondered, We've likened the Special Zones Chaos Emeralds create to Realty Marbles before, but...

"You can't escape!" Dark Lancer howled, charging at the knight.

Saber put aside her confusion and brought up her sword. Strange or not, the appearance of Power Rings was a welcome surprise. As long as she kept using them to fuel herself, her duel with Dark Lancer might have a better ending.

"Okay, where to?" Sonic asked as he and Tails raced through the bowels of Ryuudou's inner sanctum.

Tails typed into the Miles Electric. "This entire place seems to be made of Prana. But according to the Radar, there are dozens of empty points that intersect- These tunnels. I just need a moment to figure out where the source of all this Prana is. I bet that's where Rin and Sakura are."

The setting seemed to shake, and a massive pit opened up beneath the duo. With a yell, Sonic jumped and did a Homing Shot to reach the other side, while Tails flew after him. Fleshy arms sprang out from the walls to try and grab at them, but they easily rolled underneath. A new wall suddenly grew down from the ceiling, becoming an instant dead-end, but Sonic grabbed Tails and sped up, shooting past it.

"Ever get the feeling that we're not wanted?" Sonic asked his sidekick sardonically.

"I bet Avenger is trying to keep us from reaching the sisters," Tails commented, "Those Dark Servants wanted to keep us from following when they let Rin and Archer get through."

"Then I guess this is one party we *have* to crash- Sonic style!" Sonic declared, and stopped to build up speed with a Spin Dash.

Tails followed suit, and the two blasted down the tunnels, rolling across and bouncing off the walls. They would run into more of the creatures patrolling around, but the duo would easily get by them, either by destroying whatever got in their way, but more often bypassing them entirely. More pits would open up beneath them, but the pair easily got past them. On the odd occasion that Sonic *did* fall, Tails would catch and fly him to safety.

"Not that this isn't fun, but, shouldn't we have gotten there by now?" Sonic asked.

Tails reviewed his Miles Electric. "We're dealing with magic, it's not an exact science- Uh oh!"

"What?"

"The layout is changing! We're going around in circles!" Tails cried.

Sonic stopped, creating an ear-splitting screeching sound as his heels dug into the ground. Tails landed next to him, looking worried. Sonic tapped his foot in frustration as he thought about it. Snapping his fingers, he pulled out the Chaos Emerald.

"What are you going to do with that?" Tails asked.

"You said one time that Chaos Emeralds attract each other, right?" Sonic replied, "And Amy said that Avenger has a Chaos Emerald."

"You want to use that to find Avenger?" Tails guessed, "That's a not a bad idea, but the tunnels are still changing!"

"Who said we're taking the tunnels?" Sonic asked back, "I don't like taking shortcuts, but seeing as we're in a hurry..."

Tails got the drift and grabbed hold of Sonic's arm. He switched off the Miles Electric and tucked it away. Smirking, Sonic squeezed the gem as sparks began to crawl about their body.

"Chaos...Control!"

This would be a whole lot easier if these damned things didn't keep popping up. Archer thought bitterly.

As a combatant, Dark Caster was the epitome of simplicity. He didn't attack Archer directly, but instead would keep to the side and summon more Dark Creatures to do it for him. The problem was that in the time it took for Archer to slay one, two would take their place. Targeting Dark Caster directly was pointless, because no matter who well he aimed and fast Archer ran to strike, another creature would suddenly appear to obstruct the bowman. Luckily, Archer's own skills were enough to keep Dark Caster and his abominations at bay, but he knew he would burn through his own Prana and Rin's if the standoff continued.

Archer then felt a presence behind him and pivoted, swinging *Kansho*. It slashed across Avenger's chest, sending out a splatter of blood which he threw into Archer's eyes. Rather than being overwhelmed by a taste of All the World's Evil, Archer just kicked the Servant in the wound.

" *Urgh!* " Avenger hissed, "You recovered from that fast enough..."

Archer wiped his face with his longcoat. "Been there, done that." *Maybe I should use Unlimited Blade Works...*

Before the fight could resume, a familiar crackling filled the air. In a burst of light, Sonic and Tails appeared, landing right next to Archer.

"We're here!" Sonic declared.

"Yeah, but where's- Archer!" Tails looked at the bowman, "What happened to Rin?"

Not even gonna ask where they came from, Archer thought, and said, "We got separated. I think she's with Sakura."

"And, uh, is that good?" Tails asked awkwardly.

"...Maybe." Archer said evasively, "But I'm glad you showed up. I can't go find her with these two blocking my way."

While Archer spoke, Avenger glared at Sonic with the focus of laser beams. If it were possible, his gaze would have bore two holes into Sonic's head. Eventually, his eyes shifted towards the gem in Sonic's hand. In the center of his body, a purple light throbbed. Meanwhile, Sonic looked back and returned Avenger's unyielding look with one of his own. Avenger then shot his arm out, stretching it towards Sonic's Chaos Emerald with fingers twitching like the tentacles of a paralyzed octopus. Sonic jumped, ran down the arm at top speed to deliver a high-velocity kick into Avenger's head that sent the Servant reeling. Hitting the floor, Avenger's form burst into pieces before reforming.

" Give that to me. "

The words were no sooner out of Avenger's mouth when a group of creatures launched themselves at the trio. Archer let fly with a slew of exploding swords, destroying them all in seconds. Meanwhile, Avenger morphed into a ball, zipping out through a tunnel that opened up. Sonic performed a Spin Dash and shot after him, leaving Tails and Archer alone with Dark Caster when the tunnel sealed up.

"Sonic-!" Tails cried, but Archer cut him off.

"He'll be fine! He's the hero, isn't he?" Archer asked, Projecting his swords. "Anyway, I'm going to need help dealing with that guy," He pointed at Dark Caster. "He's the one whose been summoning these freaks. Think you can help?"

Nodding, Tails went into a Spin Dash and charged at Dark Caster, tearing through a bunch of creatures. Seeing the fox coming, Dark Caster pulled back one of his surprisingly muscular arms in order to throw a punch. But when Tails was right in front of him, the fox jumped up and spun around, knocking Dark Caster in the head with a swing of his tails. As Dark Caster fell, more creatures leapt up to get Tails, only to be shot out of the air by Archer. As Dark Caster

pulled himself up, more creatures gathered around, becoming a cloak of eyes of tentacles for him. He glared at Tails and Archer in a way that only a man with fish-eyes could.

Tails shuddered. "Ugh, that's gonna give me nightmares."

"I know," Archer said, nocking his bow. "On the plus side, they make easy targets."

Sonic followed the winding tunnels at top speed. He kept an eye out, but all he could see was the walls, that seemed to be almost organic as they shifted and shook.

This place is even creepier than the one Caster made, Sonic thought, it reminds me of the final stretch to the Eclipse Cannon's Core!

Sonic zipped into a wide area, and then stopped. Out from the shadows a clawed hand reached out towards his throat. Sonic easily jumped back avoid it, but then another figure appeared behind him. Sonic rolled to the side, but there was a third person there as well. They always seemed to appear from nowhere, and disappear just as quickly. Sonic eventually found himself in the center, surrounded by a large group of people, wearing black outfits with skulls masks. They leered at him, but Sonic wasn't remotely impressed.

"Y'know, I figured I was due to fight ninjas," Sonic remarked.

"Still your tongue, interloper," The skull-faces said at once, "We are no mere *shinobi*. We are the Servant Assassin, Hassan-I Sabbath."

"What, all of you?" Sonic asked, stretching. "That's convenient. Or does it get confusing during role call?"

"The name has been passed down throughout the history of our order," The Assassins said, "When one summons an Assassin, they are not merely bringing forth one warrior, but an entire history!"

"So it's a ninja-clone trick?" Sonic rolled his eyes, "Gotta say, kinda expecting more from a Magic Ghost."

"Save your critique for after the battle," The Assassins warned, "That is, if your impertinent mouth still functions once we are done."

As the Assassins spoke, Sonic curled up and prepared a Spin Dash. As he did, his body began to give off sparks of energy that were immediately pulled back into him. After a few seconds of this, Sonic stopped spinning, but instead of shooting off, stood up, leaning forward in preparation.

"We applaud your decision to flee, but it will do you no good," Said the Assassins, "Even you cannot run away from this assault."

Sonic smirked. "Who said I was running away?"

The Assassins moved. And so did Sonic.

Only, there were now as many Sonics as were Assassins. Maybe more. And they were moving four times faster than Assassin ever hope to. The entire chamber was filled with dozens of spinning blue balls that ricochet off of everything and everyone. Bodies hit the floor, and skull-faces shattered.

Once he had run out of ninjas to hit, Sonic stopped. He checked his watch. Five point seven seconds had passed. Nothing happened. Shaking out his fur, Sonic continued on. Just as he left the chamber, the tunnel entrance sealed itself up. Soon Sonic was running along a twisting, winding bridge over a pit.

"Finally!" I was starting to get board!" Sonic laughed.

A clawed hand suddenly reached out from underneath the bridge and slashed at Sonic. Sonic jumped to avoid it, and when he landed he saw an unfamiliar figure crawl onto the top. It was roughly a little over Sonic's height, with a round torso and wobbling, noodle-like

limbs. Its head was like a partly-inflated ball, with dim red lights where the eyes should be. Sonic was reminded of Chaos Zero.

"What the heck are *you* supposed to be?" Sonic asked. It didn't look like the creatures Avenger normally summoned.

Sonic got his answer when the being's torso began to glow. It was Avenger! Rather than speaking, Avenger once more slashed out at Sonic, who easily dodged. Spinning around, Sonic landed a roundhouse kick with the speed of a jet turbine into Avenger's neck. Avenger once more went *splat*, but as he did, some of his blood struck Sonic's skin. Sonic gasped as the sheer negativity invaded his mind.

Bloodiedwoundedmurderhatedispairdeathsorrow

The Shadow reached out to take away Sonic's Emerald, but Sonic suddenly went into a Spin Dash. The force sent the Shadow tumbling back, and he narrowly shifted away when Sonic shot at him. Stopping on a dime, Sonic jumped up and landed a powerful Homing Shot at the Shadow, splattering him. Among the pieces, Sonic saw the Chaos Emerald sticking out. Before he could grab it, the globs of muck reassembled, and reformed into Avenger.

"First Archer and now you..." The Shadow hissed, "Doesn't All of the World's Evil bother *anyone*? "

"What can I say? You got nothin' on Dark Gaia," Sonic made a finger gun. "Just be glad I didn't turn into a Werehog!"

Avenger materialized two crooked knives and slashed out at Sonic. Sonic easily zipped around him and landed thirty-three punches in rapid-fire succession. Avenger stumbled back, and then sank into the ground, becoming like a silhouette. Avenger zipped around Sonic, rising up to take his back, but Sonic curled up and effortlessly rolled away from The Shadow. Avenger rushed after Sonic, a hunger evident on what little remained of his face. Once he was far enough, Sonic stopped, turned around, and went into a Spin Dash. The

impact scattered Avenger's pieces again, and Sonic zipped at the global with Chaos Emerald inside.

"Jackpot!" Sonic declared as he snagged the jewel. But his feeling of triumph turned to confusion when he felt something pull at his hand. The piece of Shadow was trying to yank the Emerald out his grip. He looked in the direction of the force, and saw Avenger's body reassembling itself, with a notable gap in his torso.

"That's *mine*, " The Shadow snarled, reaching out. "It belongs to *me*. It is *part* of me."

Still feeling the pull on the Emerald, Sonic decided not to fight against it. Instead, he charged right at Avenger, rolling into a ball and letting the momentum carry him. His Spinball impacted Avenger, but when Sonic turned around to look, he once again saw the pieces had already reassembled.

This is never gonna end! Sonic thought, *How can I beat this guy? I wish I had some magic of my own...* He smacked his forehead. *Duh!*

Sonic whipped something out. It was the Rule Breaker's handle, which still had half of its blade attached. When Dark Rider had thrown it away, Sonic snagged it absentmindedly while dealing with Dark Berserker. However, it seemed like the energy from the Chaos Emerald he had on his person kept the fake Noble Phantasm from dissipating completely. With one smooth motion, Sonic plunged the broken blade into the glob of darkness on the Emerald. It made a tiny squeal and fell off, retreating to the rest of Avenger's body.

"No..." Avenger whispered, "That's not..."

"Sorry, Avenger, I don't make the rules," Sonic said, racing forwards. "But I sure love to *break 'em!* "

Avenger tried to get away, but he wasn't fast enough. Sonic tore through his body like a pinball through wet paper. The Shadow was

blown to pieces. Sonic stopped and looked around. So far, nothing happened. He didn't see any sign of Avenger reappearing.

He's not coming back... Sonic thought, *Did I get him for good this time?*

With no answer in sight, Sonic chose to keep moving forward. He had both Emeralds, and now he needed to find the others. He could only imagine how the battles were going elsewhere...

Saber fell to her knees, but rolled out of the way from Dark Lancer's spears. However, she still received a kick to the jaw that sent her flying.

Getting up, Saber spat a bit of blood before wiping her chin. She then said, "I'm sorry for deluding you."

At this, Dark Lancer stopped.

"When I entered the Holy Grail War, I was under the assumption that it was solely a battle between warriors," Saber continued, "Like you, I believed that it was to be a series of righteous duels. But now I see that it was never meant to be righteous. From the beginning, we were only meant to be fuel for the Grail's formation," She took her fighting stance. "I do not expect my words to stop you. I just wanted to say those words before we finish this battle."

Dark Lancer's expression was cold. "...It seems you will never stop finding ways to spit on my honor." He said before resuming his attack.

Meanwhile, Amy and Illya were still attacking the half-buried Dark Berserker. With his legs stuck in the sand, Dark Berserker was limited in how he could defend and retaliate against their blows.

" Storch Ritter: Knight of Bird ."

Illya's wires transformed into birds and flew at Dark Berserker. The wire-birds opened its beak and unleashed a stream of energy-bullets that shook Dark Berserker's armor.

With a thunderous roar, Dark Berserker burst out of the sand. He easily ripped the strings Illya bound to him and charged across the desert. Amy leapt at him ready to intercept, but the black knight easily jumped over her attack while kicking her in the chin. Rings fell from Amy's body as she landed head-first into the sand.

"No! You're not getting away!" Illya yelled, and her birds transformed into swords that dove at Dark Berserker.

Dark Berserker just grabbed one and used it to destroy the other. Unhindered, the dark knight continued on his way, kicking up a cloud of sand behind him. The black knight made a beeline towards the duel between Saber and Dark Lancer.

"ARTHUR~!" Dark Berserker yelled.

The sound shook the air, but Saber could not give it much thought. She was too embroiled with Dark Lancer. But then she saw Dark Berserker's form fast approaching over Dark Lancer's shoulder. Her moment of distraction was all Dark Lancer needed to get an edge. With *Gae Dearg* he pushed *Excalibur* away, knocking it out of her hands and into the sand. With his foe disarmed, Dark Lancer readied himself to impale Saber with *Gae Buidhe*.

There was the sound of flesh being torn asunder. Blood dripped onto the sand. Shirou, having heard Dark Berserker's shout and abandoned the fight against Dark Rider, ran up to the site of Saber's duel. What he saw stunned him.

Saber was sitting in the sand, white with fear. Dark Lancer stood before her. And behind him was Dark Berserker, who now held a black sword in his hands.

And half of it had been thrust through Dark Lancer's body.

Dark Lancer spat blood. In his final breath, he choked, "Why...does someone always...interfere...?"

Dark Lancer's body disintegrated. And when it was gone, Dark Berserker's sword hung in his limp hand, before it fell into the sand. The black knight stared down at Saber, who looked up at him. Shirou was then joined by Amy and Illya, who looked just as perplexed as he felt.

"What's going on *now*? " Amy asked, "I thought those two goons were working together."

Dark Berserker reached up and removed his helmet. The head that was underneath it belonged to a handsome man, truly befitting a Knight of the Round Table. But more shocking was his expression. Those watching had been expecting a face twisted by rage, much like Herakles had been. Instead, Dark Berserker's features were painted with sorrow. He looked mournful, solemn, even.

"...Fight, your majesty," Dark Berserker said, "If not for your sake, but for mine."

Nodding, Saber stood up. Without taking her eyes off of Dark Berserker, she reached and retrieved *Excalibur*. Once she held her sword in her hands, Dark Berserker threw himself at her. Saber was just barely able to stop Dark Berserker from cutting her in half. The two knights began to duel with a intense fervor, but it was immediately obvious that not only did Dark Berserker have the skill advantage, Saber's energy levels were dropping.

It's because of me, Shirou thought, Because she's bound to a weak mage like me, Saber's Prana levels are going to run out before she can even regain her motivation. I've got to do something...

Shirou prepared to Project a bow, but Illya stopped him.

"Don't, *Onii-chan* ," Illya warned, "Even if you don't care about Saber's pride, nothing you throw at that fake Berserker will do any

good."

"But you're a wizard, or something, right?" Amy pointed out, "Maybe you can give Saber some status buffs!"

Spoken like someone who only knows magic from RPG games.
Shirou thought with bitter amusement, *Too bad I can't even do that...*

" *Onii-chan*, " Illya then said, "Give me your hand."

Confused, Shirou did so. He then felt something cut into his palm and cried out in pain. Amy gasped, and Shirou then saw that Illya's own hand had a cut into it. She pressed her wound against Shirou's, and he felt a strange heat fill his body.

"What are you doing?" Amy asked.

"Like you said," Illya said, "Status buffs. *Onii-chan*, I'm giving you my own Mana. Tell Saber to take as much as she wants. She'll need it to avenge Berserker!"

Saber suddenly felt a surge a power and her Mana levels shot up. Her fatigue left her and she easily circled around Dark Berserker to strike. While he managed to block her, Dark Berserker found himself pushed back a foot from the force of her blow. Surprise was evident on both their faces. Saber chanced to look and saw Shirou and Illya holding hands. Her Master flashed her a thumbs up, and Saber nodded back, understanding. She turned back to Dark Berserker, who was now frowning.

Seeing that the situation was more or less under control now, Amy turned and ran. "Okay, you guys do what you can here, I'm going to help Bazett and Knuckles!"

"We've got this." Shirou told her. *I hope...*

Amy ran to a crimson dot in the distance. Once Amy arrived, she found Bazett looking up into the air. Curious, Amy turned her gaze

skyward and saw Dark Rider's chariot circling in the air. Just barely, she could make out Knuckles attached to the side, shifting away from Dark Rider's awkward attempts to smack him off.

"They've been at that for a while, now," Bazett said, "Even with empowered legs, I can't make that jump, or I'd be up there as well."

"Then give *me* a boost!" Amy declared, getting an odd look from Bazett.

High in the air, Knuckles continued to punch the side of the *Gordius Wheel* . However, nothing he did seemed to leave any mark on the chariot.

"You're only waisting your time, rodent!" Dark Rider snarled, lifting his sword. "This sacred vehicle was forged by forces beyond your understanding!"

When he saw Dark Rider's blade about to come down, Knuckles jumped off and began to glide through the air. He caught an updraft from Saber and Dark Berserker's fight, putting the Echidna higher into the air. Turning around, Knuckles shot towards and went into a nosedive at the Servant.

"Fool," Dark Rider grunted, preparing to counter. But then, he felt a force slam into his body, nearly hitting him out of his chariot. Turning around, he saw none other than Amy Rose standing on one of his bulls, hammer raised in readiness. "You-!"

Before Dark Rider could retaliate, Knuckles slammed into his back. Rather than waiting for the Servant to regain his balance, Knuckles quickly pulled back his fist and delivered a powerful uppercut. At the same time, Amy shot forward and slammed her hammer into Dark Rider. The force of the blows knocked Dark Rider out of his seat, and out of the chariot. He fell down, hitting the sand with the force of an anvil.

"Perfect! Now we've got a fair fight!" Knuckles declared, and jumped after the Servant.

"Wait! How do I steer this thing?" Amy cried, gesturing at the reins. With their master gone, the bulls began to run wild. Down below, Bazett gasped and chased after the chariot when it began to twist and curve uncontrollably in the air.

Back with the knights, Saber and Dark Berserker's duel continued. However, no matter what Saber did, even with the influx of power she was getting from Shirou and Illya, she could not gain an advantage over her former warrior.

"I understand why you hate me, Berserker, but the Holy Grail will not grant your wish!" Saber declared, "It was an impossible dream from the very beginning, one that will only destroy the world!"

"I don't hate you, Your Majesty," Dark Berserker said, his cool tone offset by his aggression. "But, you clearly have never truly been to the Throne of Heroes. If you had, you would understand this rage of mine." As he spoke, his attacks became more aggressive. "When I died, my only regret was not being able to come to your aide in your time of need, so I became a Heroic Spirit to change our fate with the Holy Grail. But when I did, I learned the true nature of our lives."

Saber was pushed back. "What are you...?"

"It was all planned..." Dark Berserker hissed, his face becoming ugly with as the rage took him. "Everything, from the day you pulled that sword from the stone, had in fact been set in stone!"

As his fury increased, so did the speed and force of his attacks. Saber found herself being pushed further and further as Dark Berserker pressed his assault. And as he did, his tone became more and more enraged.

"That sword's cruel enchantment not only altered your nature, but all of ours!" Dark Berserker said fiercely, "From that day on, we all

became players in a show set forth by the gods themselves!
Guinevere, myself, you... To create the Legend of King Arthur, we
were all made to suffer! "

Saber darted back as Dark Berserker unleashed a downward strike that created a small trench in the sand. From that point, she kept her distance from Dark Berserker, clashing sparingly as he continued to pursue her. However, she knew that if this kept up Dark Berserker would overcome her.

"And the vengeance I seek is not against you, or even our kingdom!" Dark Berserker continued, "This world, which glorifies the tragedy we experienced, is the true target of my rage!"

Shirou, watching this and having heard Dark Berserker's speech, realized that Saber, through it all, was still haunted by the traumatic loss of her knights and kingdom. Even with the Prana Illya was donating, the guilt she had from not being able to save her country was keeping her from fighting to her fullest. He had to snap her out of it.

"Saber!" Shirou then shouted, catching both knights' attention. "You're no longer a Knight of the Round Table! You're a Heroic Spirit now! You don't have to restrain yourself!"

Saber and Dark Berserker stared at Shirou. While Saber's eyes seemed to soften at his words, Dark Berserker's gaze narrowed. When he looked back at Saber, he saw that her expression had a strength and clarity that they did not have before, even with her resolution to fight.

Shirou's right...All this time, I've been fighting as if I were still at Battle of Camlann, sword against sword, Saber thought, But I have to go further than a knight could...I have to fight like a Servant of the War...like a Magic Ghost!

Saber raised her sword above her head, an idea forming in her head. The blade began to glow as power gathered within it and

began to concentrate. Dark Berserker saw what was happening, and then rushed forward, intent on intercepting the attack.

" *EXCALIBUR!* "

Much further away, Knuckles and Dark Rider had landed rather haphazardly in the sand. With grains shaking tumbling out of their hair and fur, their battle continued to devolve into an all-out slug-fest. Dark Rider was giving it his all, but he had dropped his sword in the fall and Knuckles was using hit-and-run tactics to land dozens of blows. However, Dark Rider refused to fall.

"Do you..." Knuckles paused to take a breath. "...give?"

"Never," Dark Rider snarled, "I have journeyed the world during my era, putting each nation I came across to heel. I have never stopped once in life, and do not intend to do so now!"

"Well, in that... Hey, what's that light?" Knuckles paused, looking past Dark Rider. His eyes widened, and he dove into the sand.

Confused, Dark Rider looked behind him...just in time for the impact. He didn't even have time to feel pain. It was over instantly.

Tails' spinball slammed into Dark Caster's chest, knocking the dark wizard back a step. A two tentacles shot out from behind at the fox, which Tails jumped over. However, as he did, Dark Caster lunged forward ready to slug Tails, his surprisingly strong hands balled into fists. Before he could connect, though, a dot of light caught one of his over-sized eyes. Caster just barely jumped back in time for a one of Archer's swords to rush over his nose. The wizard shot the bowman a glare.

"Sorry about that," Archer said, shaking his leg. It had a starfish-creature clinging to it. "Was aiming for your head."

"Just let us through already!" Tails yelled, "Why do you guys even want with Sakura?"

"The Holy Maiden must be safeguarded until her purpose is fulfilled," Dark Caster said, "In order to become the Holy Grail, we require a vessel to contain and concentrate its power."

"Vessel?" Tails asked, confused.

Archer's eyes widened, then narrowed. "So that's it... You're going to sacrifice Sakura to create a pathway to the Greater Grail!"

Tails gasped. "Sacrifice!?"

"In order for the Grail to form, a human vessel is needed," Archer said. His voice was cold, but there was a fire in his eyes. "But containing all of that power will kill whoever it is."

-Illya's eyes closed for the last time...

Dark Caster shrugged. "If we are to deny God, then such sacrifices are necessary."

Archer kicked off the starfish, and then destroyed it with *Kansho*. He then dematerialized both of his swords. "Tails, get clear. I'm going to end this... *now!* "

Archer held out his hand and a new sword began to appear. Its creation required far more Prana than either *Byakuya* and *Kansho* combined. It was a sword that had a special place in history, and an exceptionally special place in his memories.

He felt her arms next to his as she gripped the hilt of the sword. Together, they ran at the raging giant...

One the sword was fully formed, Archer ran at Dark Caster. The fallen Servant gestured for more of his Summons' to attack, but they balked. The light emitting from the blade was repellent to the creatures, the darkness that formed them burning away at its touch.

Dark Caster himself flung his arms over his face, shielding his eyes from the glow of the sword. He began to pull away, from behind Tails rammed his Spinball into him, knocking Dark Caster towards Archer's assault.

This was all the opening Archer needed. He brought the sword down, releasing a flash of holy light that engulfed the Dark Caster.

" *Caliburn!* "

When the dust cleared, there was no sign of Dark Caster. Archer sighed, and released the spell, causing the Projected sword to vanish from his hand. His heart felt heavy from memory and a distinct dip in his mana reserves.

"Whoa, total annihilation," Tails commented, looking around. "Hey, is it me, or are the walls starting to look transparent?"

"That man was probably the one who crafted this place," Archer said, "Without his existence, the spells maintaining the structure are fading." *Rin, we destroyed the fish-eyes. How are you doing? Rin? Rin!*

With Dark Rider's death, the desert began to fade away, replaced by the ruins of Caster's Labyrinth. Shirou looked to Saber, who was on her knees. He couldn't see her face past the unbound hair, but he could hear the tears falling. In front of her was Dark Berserker, who looked almost peaceful, more at ease than a man whose left half had been vaporized should be.

"There will be no King as great as you," Dark Berserker said to Saber, "Never forget that."

Saber choked back a sob. Shirou went over and helped her up.

"Young man, I ask you," Dark Berserker said, "Are you my liege 's Master?"

Shirou looked their defeated foe squarely in the eyes. "No. I'm Saber's friend."

Dark Berserker did not reply. In fact, he didn't even move. His eyes, unblinking, stared into Shirou. There was a rush of footsteps, and Shirou knew that Sonic had returned. Dark Berserker glanced briefly at the Hedgehog. For a moment, Shirou thought he was going to continue attacking. Instead, Dark Berserker 's eyes softened.

"...I see," Lancelot said, smiling. "If it led to this moment, then, perhaps...it was all worth it."

"Farewell, my liege."

With a sad, but content smile on his face, Lancelot of the Lake vanished from the world. Once he did, Saber broke down, sobbing as she mourned what to her was her knight's third passing. Off to the side, Illya just stared at the spot where Berserker- *her* Berserker had been killed by the Dark one. Shirou took Saber by the shoulder, silently offering her his support. Sonic, catching on quick, gave Saber a pat on the back.

"He seemed like a nice guy." Sonic commented.

Saber took a deep breath. When she exhaled, it felt to Shirou that she was releasing a lifetime of sorrow and anger.

"Yes," She said at last, "He was. It is a shame you could not see how he was before his corruption."

"I'm not sure about that," Shirou spoke up, "Even though he had been tainted by the Fourth War's Grail, there was a chivalry in his rage. I don't think even Avenger could smother that. And...I think that as a knight turned to evil, that chivalrous nature would prefer to be cut down by his Master, than have his rage consume the world."

Saber smiled. It was still a sad smile, but Shirou felt that his words may have helped Saber come to terms with her duel. Her eyes, at

least, brightened considerably.

" *Sonic!* " Something bright and pink leapt out of nowhere and latched onto the Hedgehog, wrapping her arms around his neck. Bazett arrived soon after.

" *Ack! Amy!*" Sonic gagged- although Shirou wasn't sure if it was because he didn't appreciate the Amy's affection, or because she was squeezing too hard.

A rock shattered, punched into bits by Knuckles. The Echidna looked nowhere near as chipper as Amy had been. In fact, he seemed outright livid.

"Who sent the death beam my way?!" Knuckles demanded, "It almost turned me into atoms!"

Saber blushed slightly from embarrassment. "I apologize, Knuckles. My battle with the Berser...with *Lancelot* proved to be more difficult than I assumed it would be. I had to use my Noble Phantasm in order to match his skills."

Knuckles grumbled, unsatisfied with the answer. However, he let the matter drop. A tell-tale whirring told them that Tails was coming, and they saw that he was accompanied by Archer.

"He-hey, Tails!" Sonic greeted, still trying to escape Amy's constricting hug. "Where's Rin?"

"I don't know! We lost track of her!" Tails replied, looking around frantically.

"While we were fighting the other Caster we became separated from Rin," Archer explained further, "She's also refusing to answer my mental calls."

"She must be going to find Sakura!" Tails exclaimed, "The Caster said that she's being used as a Grail! We have to find them before

Rin does something-!"

" *HELP!* "

The ear-splitting shriek bounced off the cavern's walls and caught everyone's attention. They looked to the source and saw Rin, carrying an unconscious Sakura in her arms. Both girls looked incredibly damaged, their clothes torn, their skin cut and bleeding, and their hair unbound. Rin swayed, clearly having trouble keeping Sakura held up and maintaining her balance at the same time. Nonetheless, she continued to stagger towards the group, refusing to let go even when Archer went over to help her.

" *She's dying!* " Rin continued to scream, tears pouring down her cheeks. " *Something happened, I don't know what, but I don't have enough Prana to heal her! Somebody...* " She began to sob. " *Save my little sister!* "

Sonic was instantly at Rin's side, holding out his arms. "Give her to me! I'll zip her over to a hospital!"

"Wait!"

Saber stood up. In that one instant, she was no longer the fallen King, mourning the loss of her country or the life of her knight. She was now a Servant, brought into the world in pursuit of a wish.

And it would be granted.

Saber turned to face a Shirou, her eyes hard. "I'm sorry, Shirou. This will hurt, but I need to do it to save your friend."

Before Shirou could ask what she meant, he gagged in pain. Saber had plunged her hand into his chest! A shining light appeared as Saber retracted her hand, but what appeared was not blood, but an ornate sheath. It was beautiful to behold, when Saber held it her own grandeur was amplified. It was an mystical object she once held during her life as a king. It was a tool Archer had seen in his own life.

It was a catalyst Illya had seen very briefly at the Einzbern castle. And Sonic had seen one very like it in another adventure...although the one he remembered was a bit different.

The sheath of King Arthur's sword, Avalon ... Sonic thought, and realized what Saber was planning. *It was inside of Shirou this whole time!*

Rin, briefly distracted from her sisters plight by *Avalon* 's splendor, did not stop Sonic from taking Sakura into his arms. Moving quickly-but-not-too quickly, Sonic carried the wounded girl towards Saber, who was marching towards them, holding *Avalon* out. The two met in the middle.

"Okay, your Majesty," Sonic said, "Give it to her."

"I will," Saber said resolutely, and in a smaller voice, said to Sakura, "I'm sorry, this will sting."

Raising *Avalon* into the air, Saber plunged the sheath into Sakura's body! Sonic gasped and nearly dropped the girl, but Saber's unflinching eyes told him to keep steady. Sakura whined a bit, but the pain appeared to be minimal. *Avalon* sank into Sakura 's abdomen, drawing no blood but vanishing into a golden light, a light that briefly rippled over the girl's entire being. The smallest of cuts and bruises Seemed to close and fade, and Sakura 's pained expression softened.

"What is that thing?" Amy asked, amazed. "Some sort of magic charm?"

"This is *Avalon* , the sheath for my sword," Saber explained, her eyes fixated on Sakura. "It is a mystical tool that heals rejuvenates those who bear it. I imagine that it was implanted inside of Shirou to save him from whatever injuries he sustained during the Great Fire of Fuyuki, by my previous Master."

"But will it be enough to help Sakura?" Tails asked worriedly. "She was in bad shape even *before* Avenger kidnapped her."

"The recovery will not be fast, but I know that the worst of it shall be healed," Saber said, "However, Sonic and I must not leave her side until she awakens," She looked Sonic firmly in the eyes. " *Avalon* 's power can only be invoked in the presence of King Arthur."

Getting Saber's drift, Sonic smirked and flashed the King of Knights an understanding smile. He looked at Sakura ' s face and saw that her expression, once so pained, was now peaceful. It was hard to believe that scarcely a minute ago she had been at death's door. During his own adventure through the Legend of King Arthur, the immortality granted by *Avalon* had been such a pain. Now, though, it's power was being put to good use.

Knuckles, meanwhile, had his own questions. "But what happened to her in the first place? "

Rin said, "I...I don't know. I was trying to keep her from becoming the Grail, when...when...I guess the excess Prana badly reacted with her messed up Mage Circuits."

"Badly reacted?" Knuckles repeated, his face scrunched up in confusion. "What's *that* supposed to Mean? "

"She just convulsed!" Rin half-shouted, "It's like something inside of her exploded, I don't know!"

Sonic and Shirou froze, and their eyes met.

Shinji stared at the smoking crater that used to be the Matou Manor. Only very tiny pieces of the house could be found scattered about. Further away, concerned citizens were making phone calls about both the noise and the debris that fell down from above. A tall plume of smoke was at the very center of the destruction.

My house... my room... my magazines... Shinji thought, too stunned to feel any emotion. *Gone!*

"Wow," Cubot commented, "That musta been some party!"

Orbot looked up and asked Shinji, "Does your universe's homeowners insurance cover for explosions? Ours does."

"...We should probably leave," Shirou said at last, " *Avalon* or not, we need to get Sakura to a Hospital."

"Yeah, plus, this place is looking pretty beat up," Tails said, looking around. "the last thing we need is a cave in on top of everything else that's happened."

Of that, there was no denying. Even though the majority of the battles had happened inside Dark Rider's Reality Marble, the few fights that occurred outside of it had done serious damage to the cavern's infrastructure. There was no sign that it would collapse immediately, but no one wanted to tempt fate.

"Don't worry, I know of a great clinic," Amy put in, "It's the same place where Bazett stayed after her own injury."

"Lead the way, Amy," Sonic said, picking up Sakura. " Or better yet, give me directions so I can carry her there."

Of course, he was joking. Even if *Avalon* 's healing powers were being doubled, Sakura's condition was too delicate to be jostled by Sonic's high-velocity delivery. The entirety of them walked towards the entrance of the cavern. To ensure that Sakura would be more comfortable, Shirou Projected a stretcher for her to be carried on. With Sonic at the front and Saber holding up the end, the group headed out to the entrance of the cavern.

"So, what are we going to tell the doctor?" Tails asked, "He's gonna wanna know how Sakura was injured."

"That won't matter," Rin declared, her eyes regaining their usual light. "We'll just hypnotize the entire building if we have to. Sakura will be taken care of, and we won't have to answer any awkward questions."

As they reached the end of the tunnel, a blinding glare greeted them. But it wasn't the sun that was shining. Instead, it was at least a dozen floodlights. Flanking the lights were a multitude of what looked like armored soldiers, armed to the teeth. Hovering in the air were several drones.

"THIS IS COMMANDER TOPAZ OF SPECIAL FORCES!" A familiar voice yelled over a speaker, "PUT YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR AND COME QUIETLY!"

"Oh man..." Sonic sighed, "Here we go again..."

To be continued_

Einzbern Consultation Room

Taiga: Huh? Where am I...Ahhh, this place again. KYAAH! Where'd this giant come from!?

Berserker: Hmmm, it's you...?

Irisviel: Hello, and welcome to the Einzbern Consultation room! We're so glad to have you, Berserker.

Berserker: Please don't call me that.

Irisviel: Wow, you have such better manners now that you're not under the Mad Enhancement! Do you have any regrets or questions before you pass on?

Berserker: I have several. First off, why was I summoned as a Berserker? Surely any who know of my tales would know better than to force such a limitation on me.

Irisviel: Ahh, that was probably grandfather. He doesn't like it when people think for themselves. He probably became paranoid when Kiritsugu betrayed him ten years ago.

Taiga: Kiritsugu was always an upstanding man in my memories... You're grandfather must have been a real stinker if Kiritsugu had to go against him.

Berserker: Your grandfather... Yes, I remember. To test my might and Illya's skill as a Master, Jubstacheit von Einzbern had both of us thrown into the forest surrounding the family castle. She was almost killed by the wolves.

Taiga: WHAAT?! That monster! That's child-abuse!

Irisviel: In the many centuries since the Fuyuki Grail Wars were established, the goal of completing the Holy Grail and possessing its power has all but consumed grandfather. Kiritsugu once told me that he felt Jubstacheit's emotions could be condensed into the word "Achievement." Nothing else moves him.

Berserker: If I had any concerns left, it would be that Illya will be subjected to Jubstacheit's treatment again, now that I am no longer here to protect her.

Taiga: Do not worry, Master Herakles! I will personally protect Illya from that monstrous stinker! I'll get *my* grandfather to have Illya's care transferred to the Fujimura group. And if that stinker doesn't like it, he can taste the sting of the *Tora-shinai!* (*Whacks Berserker*)

Berserker: ...

Irisviel: Ah~ Zecchan, that was uncalled for...

Berserker: Thank you.

Irisviel & Taiga: Huh?

Berserker: In life, my own offspring were killed by Hera's meddling. Knowing that someone will take of Illya in my place...that puts me at ease. Goodbye. (*Leaves*)

Irisviel: Well, good job, Zecchan! I was worried your personality would make things complicated, but you have truly earned your place in the Consultation Room!

Taiga: Thank you, *Shishou*, I was glad I could... Hey! That wasn't a complement!

Irisviel: The Consulation Room is now closed, until the next Servant arrives. ***Only four more to go...***

Taiga: Goodbye, every- four?

Nowhere To Run

Chapter 23: Nowhere to Run

I'm...not done...yet...

Those were the thoughts that repeated through the mind of Avenger. The Shadow. Angra Maiyu. It was a mantra that kept his focus, a will that held his body together. It echoed in his heart as he dragged himself away from the sacred mountain.

When Sonic stabbed his body part with the Rule Breaker, it didn't just sever his connection with the Chaos Emerald, but also his bond to Sakura's soul. Combined with the damage he suffered when Zouken's Mana exploded and the blows from Sonic's attacks, Avenger was in terrible shape. His body seemed to be partially melting, held together only in the faintest sense.

A Master...I need a Master... Avenger thought, pushing himself forward. *If...if I can find a living soul to form a contract with...*

Avenger could sense life energy from the city. But the souls there were faint, mere specks of spirituality. They would only sustain him for a single day each before dying of Mana deprivation. Still, it was better than nothing...

Avenger was so fixated on the path ahead of him that paid no mind to the stomping sound fast approaching. But his hunger was such that the life force nearing became his new target. Before he could act on it, a great metal capsule suddenly appeared and scooped Avenger up, sealing him in an airtight lock. Only a single, round window gave a hint as to what was inside it. It was attached to a long steel tentacle, which was connected to the Egg Walker manned by Dr. Eggman.

"My, what a strange creature *you* are," Eggman commented, looking at his quarry. "I wonder what tricks you can do."

Lancer would have been at Ryuudou sooner, but the explosion from the Matou Manor distracted him. Granted, the entire War so far had been nothing *but* distractions. Between Eggman's robots lurking around everywhere, the strange creatures, not to mention Sonic and his friends stirring things up, it was almost impossible to focus on the Holy Grail War. The only solace in this whole mess was that it caused Kirei even more ulcer's than it did him. That, and whatever turned the Matou property into a smoking crater also did in the aged patriarch of the Matou clan.

By the time Lancer got to the mountain, the entire place, the temple and surrounding grounds, was swarming with soldiers and other workers. Men with high-tech devices like geiger counters mulled about. He recalled a large operation going of a similar nature near the Einzbern Castle after Eggman attacked it, and wondered if the mad doctor was involved in Ryuudou as well.

I wonder if Saber's group or Sonic was here, too, Lancer thought, looking on. *Of course, they've probably already flown the coop. Not like either of them could get caught by the government...*

When the darkness gave way to the light, Sakura was staring up at a ceiling. Her vision was a still a little hazy, but it was definitely a ceiling. Not a particularly interesting one, either. Just the same kind you find in any public building.

Why does heaven have florescent lighting? Sakura thought blearily. As her head began to clear, she realized that she was lying in a bed. As she began to take stock in her surroundings, she realized that she was in a hospital room. A faint breathing caught her ears, and looking at the source, Sakura gave a slight gasp that made her chest hurt. Sleeping in a chair on one side of her bed was none other than Rin!

"Are you all right?"

Sakura looked to her other side. Sitting in yet another chair was Saber. The Servant was dressed in her casual wear, but her posture was erect. It was like looking at a statue. However, Saber's eyes were steady, but focused. Her gaze was pointed directly at Sakura, almost staring into your soul.

"What...happened?" Sakura asked.

"We destroyed Avenger and his creations," Saber said, "He is no longer bound to your soul."

"Oh...good..." Sakura had no idea how to react. It sounded so wonderful to hear, but she knew from experience that her life was never that good. But there was still so much she didn't know. She could barely remember what had happened after passing out in Ryuudou. And the time between that and her breakdown at the Tohsaka mansion was admittedly hazy. Sakura's eyes drifted towards Rin's sleeping form.

"Y'know, I think we've had the wrong idea about Big Sis," A voice piped up. Sonic poked his head at the foot of Sakura's bed. "She talks tough, but, you shoulda seen her when we brought her in here. Wouldn't leave your side for a second!"

Sakura found this amazing to hear. Rin certainly hadn't cared when she was given to the Matous. Had the Tohsaka heiress grown a heart? *Or more likely*, a cynical part of her whispered in the darkness of her mind, *she needs to make sure you won't produce more monsters like Avenger.*

"I'm going to call the doctor." Saber said, standing up. "He told us to alert someone once you woke up."

"And I guess that's my cue to leave." Sonic said, standing up to stretch. "Wouldn't want to answer any awkward questions."

He zipped over to a window and pushed open the curtains. Bright sunlight filled the room. Sonic opened the window and took a moment to inhale the fresh air. Sonic then tossed something onto Sakura's lap. It was a book.

"I picked that up from your house," Sonic explained, "Not a very complex story, but I think you'll like the pictures."

And with that, Sonic jumped out the window. Confused, Sakura looked at the book. It looked vaguely familiar, but her eyes focused on the title; *Sakura*. Her hands feeling a bit steadier, Sakura opened the book and looked at its contents.

It was her. Or rather, it was the old her. The pictures depicted a happy girl, completely unaware that one day she would traded away like an extra baseball card. She remembered each moment, a life that ended when she was first sent down to the worm pits.

That's when Sakura realized. For the first time in as many years, she could not feel Zouken's presence. The crest worms he used to control and keep tabs on her were gone. Was that why she hurt? Had they been removed somehow? Through surgery, as impossible as it seemed? As Sakura reached into her clothes to see if she feel any sign of sutures, a faint groaning reached her ears.

"-at time is..." Rin rubbed her eyes and pushed herself up. Once she became aware of the two people in the room, she instantly sat up, just as rigid as Saber had been- With the reddened cheeks as a difference. Rin's eyes drifted to the album in Sakura's hands, and the reddening increased in size.

"I'll be right back," Saber said, leaving the room. "I need to call Shirou and tell him what has happened."

Once the door closed, Rin and Sakura stared at each other. An uncomfortable silence filled the air. Finally, Rin spoke.

"I...I suppose you want to know how we got here from the mountain..." She said, awkwardly averting her eyes. "Well..."

Everyone stared at the large squad that was waiting outside the entrance to Caster's lair inside the mountain.

"Why are there people out here?" Shirou whispered out of the corner of his mouth. "Didn't someone set up a Boundary Field?"

"We did," Bazett hissed, "Even if Eggman's robots came, these normal soldiers shouldn't be here!"

"Those aren't soldiers, they're robots," Illya muttered, her eyes narrowing. "I can't sense any Mana from them. That's why they got through the Boundary Field, just like the Badniks."

It was Sonic who broke the stalemate. Stepping forward, he said, "Hey! I don't suppose someone brought an ambulance along? We've got a medical emergency here!"

One drone hovered up and examined Sakura. After a moment, a gap appeared in the wall of robots and stepped forward. Topaz' voice came over the speakers again.

"Come this way. We'll have transport to the nearest available clinic ready. The rest of you though, need to answer some questions."

The group cautiously followed the path set out for them. At the foot of the mountain, they found a makeshift military outpost set up. Two men with a stretcher came by and put Sakura on it. A truck backed up, and Sakura, along with Rin, Saber, and Sonic boarded it. Archer went to the driver's seat and pushed the driver out.

"Hey, what are you doing?" The soldier cried, "You can't drive!"

"Be quiet," Rin said, holding a finger up to her forehead. "You gave driving duties to another soldier."

"What? I..." The soldier's eyes glazed over. "Yes, ma'am..."

As Archer drove Sonic and the heroines away, Illya created a Boundary Field within the area. One by one, soldiers began to line up to her.

"...And then Illya and Bazett hypnotized the CO and everyone else on the squad once we got there," Rin finished, "Hopefully, that will be the end of it. I'm getting worried, though. The government has been poking around Magecraft sites more and more... If Bazett reports that to the Mage's Association, we could be in serious trouble."

Sakura didn't respond. She just kept staring at Rin.

A little unnerved by the silence, Rin continued. "Erm, Emiya- *kun* went back to his house to prepare a breakfast for you. Af-after what you've been through, you could probably want something tastier than hospital food. Archer is keeping an eye on him since Saber stayed here."

The quiet was deafening. And it caused Rin's composure to weaken. She became very interested in her knees.

"I...I hear the Matou Manor is gone!" Rin blurted out suddenly, "I don't know how, but Shirou and Sonic caused the old man to explode, or something. Who knew those two softies had it in them, right? Shinji was out, so he's still alive, but I don't know what he's going to do..." Rin swallowed, "I know you like to stay at Emiya's place sometimes, so you can just do that, I guess..." She glanced at Sakura. "But, um, once the Mansion is fixed, you can always... If you want..."

"But...what do *you* want?" Sakura finally asked.

Rin didn't answer. She just hugged her knees. It was a sight to see. Sakura had never seen her sister look so... *vulnerable* . Even when they were children, Rin had always been the strong, determined one.

Finally, Rin said, "I...I know we haven't really...look, what happened back then was wrong, okay? But Father insisted it was right, and-

Mom just accepted it, so..." She bit the bottom of her lips. "We...we haven't been sisters since then, but...would you like to, maybe..." Rin sighed, "I want you to live with me. But I know you hate me for not giving a damn until now, so..."

"Why didn't you kill me?" Sakura asked finally. It was what she really wanted to know.

Rin opened her mouth to say that she had no intention of killing her, but the words didn't come out. She tried to explain that Avenger's destruction meant that Sakura was no longer cursed, but the lecture died in her throat. Finally, Rin looked at Sakura, but she couldn't see very well. The tears were in the way.

"...Because we're sisters."

On the other side of the door, Saber smiled.

"Why are you smiling?" Shirou asked Archer.

"No reason that concerns you," Archer replied, "Besides, shouldn't you be finished with that by now?"

"It *is* finished," Shirou said, packing up the breakfast. Given Sakura's condition, he chose light-tasting. He handed the box to Sonic, who saluted and zipped off. "So you can go back to Rin."

"Not happening," Archer said, "I have orders from my Master to keep you alive until Saber gets back to watch your suicidal butt."

"I am *not* suicidal." Shirou protested in annoyance.

Archer pointed at the television set, where Illya was engaged in a play-through of *Vectorman*. "You're letting a rival Master into your home- one who's tried to kill you once before."

"Illya's not a Master anymore," Shirou stated, "Berserker was killed in the last battle, remember? There's no harm in letting her stay here."

"But she's still a Master," Archer pointed out, "She can always form a contract with a wayward Servant- that Assassin from Ryuudou got away, didn't he? Or, more likely, she could kill *you* and take Saber for her own."

"I don't want another Servant," Illya piped up. She was still playing her game. "If I can't win with Berserker, then there's no point. Besides, Shirou's my brother. You don't betray family."

Archer stared at the back of Illya's head. Shirou wasn't sure why, but he was reminded of the times when Saber looked at Illya. Like he was thinking of someone else.

The bowman sighed, but if he was going to say anything, it was cut off by the phone ringing. While Illya turned down the volume on the television (Heaven forbid she should pause the game. The horror!), Shirou went to answer the phone. Giving Archer one last odd look, he picked up and spoke into the receiver.

"Hello, Emiya residence." Shirou greeted.

" *Master Emiya,* " A deep voice said, " *I hope you are doing well.* "

Shirou felt his blood go cold. He recognized that voice anywhere. A tone that was somewhere between comforting and disdainful. Velvety, but wrapped in a sour shell. " *Kotomine?!* "

At the TV, Illya instantly set her game to pause. Archer immediately Reinforced his ears to better listen in.

" *I'm glad to hear that you recognize me. Considering we've only met once.* "

"You...where have you been?" Shirou asked, "We couldn't find you at the Church..." *And the police are looking for you, because apparently there were dead bodies found underneath the building. Not to mention that Sonic thinks you're working with Lancer and so far he hasn't steered me wrong...*

" *Caster attacked me,* " Kirei replied, " *I would have reemerged sooner after she was defeated, but the military investigation at the Church forced me to stay in hiding longer.* "

I'll bet. Shirou thought. Aloud, he asked, "Does this mean you'll be returning to the Church?"

" *Yes, but that's not why I called,* " Kirei said, " *I've been using my own familiars to keep track of the War's activities, as best as I can, at least.*"

"You have?" This was news to Shirou. He wondered what the priest had seen exactly...

" *My own father was killed during the previous War. I've learned that a little caution can go a long way. Which brings me to my point; From what I've heard, the group you've formed with Rin and the Einzbern child encountered a squad of soldiers at Mt. Ryuudou. Is that true?* "

"Yes, but you don't have to worry about that," Shirou said. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Archer hold up a sheet of paper with the words 'DON'T MENTION BAZETT!' written on. "We hypnotized the soldiers so they won't remember seeing us there."

" *I'm afraid that's not the point,* " Kirei said, " *Too many times the military has gotten close to Magecraft. I'm afraid drastic measures may be required. I need you to contact Rin so we can work out a plan to settle this situation.* "

"Why can't you do that yourself?" Shirou asked. Meanwhile, Archer had crossed out 'BAZETT' and wrote 'Sakura' underneath on his paper.

" When I stopped by the Tohsaka Mansion to speak with her about this matter, I found it under surveillance, " Kirei explained, " Be sure to tell Rin to meet me at the church at night. "

Shirou looked at Archer. The white-haired seemed to be boring a hole into Shirou's head with his eyes. "...I'll be sure to do that."

" Thank you. "

Shirou hung up. Archer had shut his eyes, and Shirou wondered what was going inside the bowman's head. Rin's Servant was such an enigma. His attitude grated on Shirou's nerves, but at the same time he couldn't but feel a small sense of admiration for him (Not as much as Sonic, but...). Furthermore, Saber once mentioned to him that Archer, during her brief clash with him at the beginning of the War, already seemed to know the basic shape of her sword, even when cloaked with Invisible Air. While he could have been someone who had seen Saber fight during her time as King Arthur, Archer didn't *dress* like someone born in Arthurian times.

If Shirou *could* see into Archer's mind, he would have only seen this one sentence; *So, Kotomine's still alive...*

At the Tohsaka Mansion, Tails had just finished crafting an improved Chaos Emerald container. Unlike the first one, which was the size of a lunch box, this new version had been made from lining a suitcase with the lead needed to block the energy signature of the jewels. On the inside were seven slots, four of which were already filled. Yellow, red, purple, green lights shone brightly as Tails shut the lid. Knuckles was already on the hunt for the remaining gems, and once Amy retrieved the Emerald she and Bazett had found on their own, they would only need two more.

Speaking of which, he wondered where to keep the ones they had. He wanted to stash the Emeralds in the *Tornado* 's compartment, but that was so obvious. If any Badniks got onto the Mansion grounds

and past the perimeter security, the bi-plane would be the first place they would check. Perhaps somewhere in the Mansion...

"Hey, Tails," Sonic greeted, lying next to Tails in the grass of the backyard. "Working hard, or hardly working?"

"Both," Tails chuckled, and the two exchanged a hi-five. "But seriously, any idea where I should hide this?" He asked, gesturing towards the Emerald case.

Sonic rubbed the space under his nose in thought. "I guess the *Tornado* would be too obvious a choice..." He snapped his fingers. "I got it!"

Sonic took the briefcase and led Tails into the Mansion. After some searching, they found the stairs leading down to the basement. Granted, "Basement" was a broad term for the area. It looked more like the study of a wizard, which, given who owned it, was entirely accurate. The spells that should have kept intruders out had been disrupted by Avenger's attack the previous day, and Rin, in her haste to reclaim Sakura, had neglected to restore them. Sonic took in the surroundings, nodding with approval. Compared to the underground lairs of the last mystics he had encountered in Shirou's world, Rin's was certainly an improvement.

Meanwhile, Tails was calling up Rin on his communicator to keep her informed of what they were doing. Mostly because she could rather testy when others poked around her house.

(And boy, imagine her fury when she sees how Knuckles left the bathroom.)

Sonic, for his part, looked for an unused nook to stick the briefcase in. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted an old chest in the corner.

"Hey, how about he put the Emeralds in this box?" Sonic suggested.

" *DON'T OPEN THAT BOX!* " Rin shrieked through the speaker. The feedback was so bad that bad Sonic and Tails clutched their ears in pain.

"Okay, we won't, jeez," Sonic groaned, "We'll just...put in here, then."

Deep within the confines of infinite space, contained safely within the chest, a certain Mystic Code thought, "Curses, foiled again!"

For the first time since he had arrived in this strange, dark, and emotionally conflicting universe, Knuckles felt pretty confident about the day. After the harrowing adventure against the Dark Warriors underneath Mt. Ryuudou and subsequent encounter with the military, Knuckles had slept until the late morning at Shirou's place. But after a hardy breakfast (He made a note to pick up some groceries to pay Shirou back), he was finally back on the hunt for the remaining Chaos Emeralds.

And at the moment, his search had led him to a building in the city. According to the sign out front, it was for a business called, "Exciting Splash!". Knuckles' Treasure-hunting instincts told him that despite its otherwise ordinary appearance, there was something inside.

I hope it's a Chaos Emerald this time and not some freakish Magic Ghost again... Knuckles thought as he walked through the doors. There were very few people out, so Knuckles didn't worry about being spotted in broad daylight.

Inside was a large indoor pool area. Several pools, in fact. There were also slides and showers. It was sparsely populated, but what people there were clearly enjoying themselves. Knuckles wandered about, looking for a secluded place where a Special Zone entrance would appear. However, his search yeilded no results, except for the bruise he got when an opening door hit him in the face.

"Ow! Hey, watch..." Knuckles stopped talking when he saw who was coming out of the changing room.

Clad in only a pair of relatively modest shorts, with a towel slung over his shoulders, was none other than the man who attacked the group under Ryuudou Temple several nights ago; The Archer from the Fourth Holy War. He was talking on a cell phone, so he didn't pick up on Knuckles' words immediately. Knuckles instantly dove into a nearby trash can and held his breath.

"...Hmm?" The Fourth Archer glanced at the space where Knuckles used to be. Shrugging he walked on. "I'm sorry, I must have zoned out, please continue."

Once he was sure it was safe, Knuckles poked his head out, watching as the golden-haired, red-eyed man made his way to a lone reclining chair by the largest pool's edge. It had been fenced off by a velvet rope with a sign marking that the area was reserved for "private" use. His eyes narrowing, Knuckles pulled himself out of the can, got on all fours, and crawled towards the pool. Along the way he snatched up a towel someone had left lying on the floor and went into the water. With the towel over his body for cover, Knuckles swam towards Fourth Archer's area. Thankfully, the man with red eyes seemed to be preoccupied with his phone conversation to pay any mind to tiny people under towels.

"-least that mess is taken care of," He was saying, "To think that wretch Zouken had the gall to bring such vulgar creatures into my world. So? Is that all you have to say to me?" He paused. "I see...yes, that *is* good to hear. After all, the question *has* been burning in my brain."

What Fourth Archer did next astonished Knuckles. He reached out, and a portal, much like the ones he created in Caster's but smaller, opened up. The golden-haired man's hand went into it, and when it retracted it was holding some sort of exotic beverage with a twisting straw and little paper umbrella.

So he can pull out more than weapons? Knuckles thought, *What is that power?*

After taking a long sip, Fourth Archer continued. "I'll be sure to pay that little rodent a visit, once he gathers the rest of his little toys for me. But for now, we should focus on attaining the doll."

Doll? An image of a floppy effigy made in the likeness of Tails flashed through Knuckles' mind, and he shuddered.

"If her pet brute hasn't been killed by now...well, my Gate of Babylon has enough treasures to destroy a *hundred* of his lives," Fourth Archer chuckled evilly, "Now, don't bother me unless you have something relevant to report. I want to enjoy the rest of my workout in peace."

Fourth Archer hung up, and deposited the phone into another portal. How he managed to do these things in broad daylight without anyone noticing would be a riddle for the ages, but so far all Knuckles cared about was getting as far as he could away from the red-eyed man so he could tell the rest of the gang about what he had learned. Still covered by the towel, Knuckles crawled away, unintentionally writing the Legend of the Living Towel which would be passed down through the generations to come.

And Rouge always made this spying business sound hard...
Knuckles thought, *But what the heck is a " Gate of Babylon ?"*

Once Knuckles was out of the Exciting Splash, he began to climb up the side of the building. Once he was high enough, he jumped off and began to glide. He was not aiming in any direction in particular; He let his instincts and the wind carry him...preferably away from the pool.

Thanks to Saber and *Avalon* , Sakura's recuperation was over by noon. And thanks to the meals prepared by Shirou and delivered by Sonic, all three girls were in much better moods to argue when the doctor came to insist that Sakura remain a bit longer just in case. Rin wanted to use hypnosis to end the discussion, but earlier Saber had insisted they not resort to that unless it regarded maintaining

Magecraft's secrecy. The constant encounters with the government forces were beginning to unease her. Saber's battle instincts were telling her that something was on the horizon, and it wasn't going to be another Grail battle...although there would undoubtedly be those as well. Rin had assured her that agents from the Mage Association and the Holy Church would be working to keep the truth of what was happening in Fuyuki buried, but Saber wasn't convinced.

Thankfully, Saber's own Rank-B Charisma was enough to cow the doctor into agreeing that some fresh air and sunshine would be good for Sakura. He left the room looking extremely pale and excited at the same time, as would anyone just in the presence of a king exerting their authority.

Once they were out of the hospital, the ladies hailed a cab. At Sakura's insistence, they weren't going to either the Emiya Estate or the Tohsakah Mansion. Instead, they were going to someplace far less welcoming; the Matou Manor. Or, more accurately, the crater where it used to be.

They were authorities there, of course. The area had been fenced off by police tape and partitions, and men in radiation suits were going about with geiger counters. One police officer saw the three ladies, of course, and came over.

"I'm sorry, but this area is off-limits," He said, "I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Do you know what happened here, sir?" Saber asked. She noticed that Sakura was staring resolutely at the center of the crater.

The policeman shook his head. "Investigation is still on-going. We don't have enough information to make a- Hey, you're Saber!"

Rin and Saber tensed up. They didn't like where this was going. Why was this officer of the law familiar with Saber's face? Meanwhile, Sakura kept looking at the crater.

"I'd like to answer a few questions, if that's all right with you," The officer said, pulling out a pen and notepad. "An eyewitness sighted you and another person heading towards this property. Did you see anything unusual here?"

Rin looked as intently as she could out of the corner of her eyes. Although she didn't have a telepathic link to Saber, she desperately tried to project her thoughts to the blond Servant. *Don't admit you were here! Lie! Say it's a mistake!*

"I came here to discuss the health of one of our friends," Saber said, and Rin screamed internally. Saber gestured at Sakura, who was still gazing at the crater. "As you can confirm by checking her medical records, Sakura has not been feeling well. Shirou and I confronted Zouken about it, and he confessed to severely abusing her physically and mentally. When he became violent towards us, we left."

Rin was pretty impressed. It was an amazing cover story, while at the same time being technically accurate. In hindsight, it was patently obvious that in order to have been ruler of a nation, the ability to "tactfully edit" information was a necessity.

"...And you have no idea what could have caused this disaster?" The officer was asking as he wrote Saber's testimony down.

"We left before any such thing happened," Saber said flawlessly, invoking a bit of her Level B charisma. "I had no idea someone like Zouken kept explosives on his property."

As the officer jotted Saber's words down, there came a yell from the crater. A worker was holding up something that looked like a piece of charred metal. Reinforcing her eyes, Rin saw that by its design that it might have been a robot sent by Eggman (Given how wrecked it was, it was hard to tell).

Getting an idea, Rin pointed down into the crater at the worker and asked, "Do you think that thing he's got may be responsible?"

However, the police officer waved her off. "I can neither confirm nor deny anything at this time. Once the investigation is complete, an official statement will be released."

That didn't seem to work. At the very least, the officer was no longer interested in talking to Saber. She and Rin returned to Sakura, who was sitting on her knees, still looking into the crater.

"Are you all right?" Rin asked.

"...He's really gone," Sakura said softly. Tears began to well up in her eyes. "I thought it was too good to be true, but...I can't feel his presence at all."

Sakura covered her face and began to weep. However, both Saber and Rin could see that she wasn't crying with sadness. She was letting out more than a decade's worth of pain and suffering. And it wasn't just for her, that she was crying.

"Uncle Kariya...I'm free..." She whispered, " *We're free...*"

Saber looked at Rin, and now saw that the Tohsaka Master had tears in her own eyes. However, Rin just wiped them away with a hankchief. While the reunion with her sister had awoken the long-dormant nurturing sections of her brain, Rin's default insistence on appearing strong and emotion-free was still a force to be reckoned with.

"We-" She sniffed, pushing back more tears. "We should see how Shirou is doing. I just realized that I left him alone with Illya."

Saber grimaced, and Sakura looked confused. She didn't know about Shirou's new association and unofficial adoption of the Einzbern girl. Once her sister better explained the situation, her expression changed to one of horror.

"Shirou's letting a former Master into his house...?" Sakura gasped.

"Archer's watching him," Rin said quickly, not wanting Sakura to faint over from the stress of worrying. "I'm sure he can keep things in line."

Saber thought about how much effort Archer gave in any endeavor that didn't involve the Holy Grail. She immediately broke into a run. Two seconds later, she returned, picked Sakura up in her arms, and rushed off again.

"Hey! Get back here! Wait for me!" Rin shouted, running after them.

Agent Stuart was busy submitting a report for his higher-ups. Although calling it a "report" was somewhat generous. Despite the combined efforts of himself, Dr. Pierceman, and Commander Topaz, the investigation was somewhat stagnant. He knew that whatever was happening in Fuyuki, Tohsakah, Emiya, and their associates were involved, but until he could pinch them for something, there was no way he could legally bring them in for questioning. It was frustrating.

Sometimes I wish I were part of a government that allowed blackbagging... Stuart thought absent-mindedly when his phone began to ring. "Hello?"

"Agent Stuart? This is Pierceman. According to our instruments, the energy field around the Fuyuki Church has recently reappeared. Furthermore, according to our bug, Kotomine Kirei is attempting to make contact with Tohsaka Rin. "

Stuart sat up suddenly.

When the "Heroine Team"© arrived at the Emiya Estate, Shirou passed Kirei's message to Rin. Rin was surprised to hear the Fake Priest was still alive, but quickly the discussion shifted to what to do about the increasing surveillance the military was performing.

"At the very least, we can blame Eggman if we have to," Rin said, "I've been keeping track of the news. There are some people that think Sonic and his friends are actually robots, too!"

"Is that such a good idea?" Sakura asked faintly.

Rin nodded. "Honestly, it's better than the usual cover stories we've used in the past. And it's only temporary. Once Sonic's group goes back to their home, they'll take Eggman with them and everything can go back to normal."

Only Saber and Archer noticed Shirou becoming very still. But it was Saber who spoke next. "That may be fine for a resolution, but we have no idea when that will be. Sonic needs all seven of the Chaos Emeralds before he can transport his group and Eggman back to their world. We don't know where the last two are, it will take time to find them. Meanwhile, the Holy Grail War rages on."

"But is it?" Shirou asked finally, "We now know that the Holy Grail is cursed. We can focus on finding the remaining Emeralds now."

"I don't think the remaining Masters and Servants will just wait for us to send the Sonic bunch away," Illya piped up, "Lancer and his Master are still out there, and we don't know what happened to Assassin. They'll keep fighting and that will draw Eggman to stir up more trouble, which will cause the military to take a closer look."

"Which means we have no choice," Rin stated, "We have to cancel the Grail War. I'll talk to Kirei, and we'll get his help taking down Lancer and his Master."

Archer's impeccable self-control kept him from groaning outwardly. The sheer irony nearly gave him indigestion. It certainly caused his brain to stall. He knew damn well how *that* request would go. Unfortunately, by the time his mental facilities recovered, he and Rin were already halfway to the Church.

This may be a bad idea, going alone, Archer said.

Look, Kirei asked for me, and me alone, Rin said, If I'm going to convince him to go along with cancelling the War- As in, actually taking part in implementing it - then I'm going to need to play by his rules, for just a little bit.

You remember what Sonic said, didn't you? About Lancer and Kirei working together? Archer pointed out, I don't think we can count on Kirei to do anything noble.

Rin didn't reply at first. Archer thought she was formulating a reply that would dismiss his concerns (and Sonic's accusations) without sounding too much like she was grasping. The War had been rough on her ego and the Pillars of Truth she had constructed her mental world around. Bringing Sakura back and recognizing the cruelty of her forced departure from the Tohsaka Clan was a good start, but that meant Rin would be less willing to accept that a friend of the family was in fact an enemy.

Which was why it was so surprising when Rin instead said, via mind-link, *Not long after Sonic's gang showed up, I had an unusual dream.*

Did you? Archer asked, privately noting, *Where's she going with this?*

It was about Shirou adopting Illya. I thought it was nonsense at the time. Not even Shirou would be reckless enough to bring that little menace into his life on a permanent basis. And then he did.

I guess there's no accounting for taste. Archer cracked. However, he was secretly pleased he could see Illya intergrate herself into the Emiya household a second time. Not that it wouldn't make knowing she was going to die within a year any less painful.

As part of their connection, Masters and Servants can, when they sleep, view into each others lives. Rin stated.

Archer began to get worried, but he remained calm. *That's not supposed to happen for a while.*

I know. That's why I wrote my earlier vision off as a warped nightmare, Rin replied, But, Tails told me something about the Chaos Emeralds once. He said they were amplifiers- They didn't create new powers, they just enhanced preexisting abilities. There was a Chaos Emerald in Shirou's house that nearly killed him when he tried Projecting. And the Shadow emerged from Sakura because of the Emeralds, as well. Other abilities could be increased as well.

Archer didn't answer.

Archer...why was I dreaming about Shirou's future...when I should have been dreaming about your past?

Archer should have responded with a sarcastic, vague comment that would be positively misleading, but technically accurate. Rin was poking at a can of worms he did not want to open. But a small part of his mind kept insisting that coming out about his true identity would help clear things up. If Rin knew what Archer had experienced in his Grail War, would she be more cautious of Kirei? And perhaps, would that change Shirou's fate and his own? It was a crazy thought, but so far the entire War had been crazy. Utter Chaos, even.

Archer almost snorted at the idea. It was tempting, but that would mean bringing up his status as a Counter Guardian, and the countless deaths he had caused in his role as one. But if Rin was already starting to dream about his past, it was possible that she was close to the truth.

Instead of saying anything, Archer waited until the cab had dropped Rin off at the edge of the church's Boundary Field. Once it was gone, he rematerialized in physical form. Rin raised an eyebrow. He reached into his pocket of his longcoat, and pulled out a precious stone tied to a string.

Rin's other eyebrow shot up.

"This isn't my first Holy War," Archer said, "But the one I went through wasn't like this. There were no robot armies, or mad

scientists, and certainly no catchphrase-spouting mascot heroes. It was...what a Holy War should be. Depressing, but with a bright spot if you have a generous perspective."

Rin looked down, and Archer was a bit pleased to see that she appeared gobsmacked by his confession. But, she recovered quick enough. Perhaps she *had* saw enough of his past to believe him.

"Did I win?" Was her first question.

Archer couldn't even bother rolling his eyes. "No. And the Grail was cursed in that timeline as well."

Rin frowned, making growling noises under her breath. Then she asked, "What does this have to do with Kirei?"

"In my War, Kirei was working to steal the Grail for himself," Archer explained, and he was pleased to see Rin stop. "He stole Lancer's Command Seals from his original Master and worked to play the other Masters against each other."

Rin had a conflicted expression on her face. "And I suppose you know who that golden guy from Mt Ryuudou is, do you?"

"He's Gilgamesh, the King of Heroes," Archer stated, "And he and Kotomine are working together."

Rin didn't respond at first. Archer could see on her face the internal war waging inside, between believing his admittedly crazy story, or blindly hoping that Kirei was...not-evil (Because seeing him as good would require an *incredibly* generous perspective). Rin, for all of her stubborn insistence on being seen as yet another cold-hearted mage, was actually quite fond of those close to her. Hopefully, Kirei really was such a jerk to her as he was to everyone that she wouldn't dismiss the notion of him being evil out of hand.

"You...you said that there was a lot of things different in this timeline, wasn't there?" Rin said at last, "For all you know, Kirei is different as

well. We shouldn't make any snap judgements until we get a further scope of the information."

Archer sighed, but didn't press the subject. He knew that Rin could be very stubborn. And maybe she had a point. No, she was clearly delusional. But, from what he remembered, Kirei didn't make a move until it was only Saber and Lancer. Maybe they still had time.

And Gilgamesh isn't secretly plotting to make Saber his bride and destroy the world, Archer thought glumly as he reentered astral form, And while I'm at it, I wish I had a sportscar, too.

"Ha! Here it is!" Amy held up the Chaos Emerald, it's blue light glittering. "Now I need to get this to Sonic."

"I hope you can wait until it's darker out." Bazett said, lying on her bed.

"I don't see why," Amy responded, "I mean, we can just hail a taxi, and you can hypnotize the driver into forgetting about me if you're worried I might get spotted."

That wasn't such a bad idea. But Bazett was a bit exhausted. A fight to the death, followed by hypnotizing soldiers, had taken a bit out of her. And not just physically. It was incredibly concerning, to think about how many times the military was taking a closer look at sites of Magecraft. While she knew that agents of both the Mage's Association and Church would be working around the clock to make sure any information about the Holy War would stay away from the government and public at large, she also knew that they were quite trigger-happy when it came to possible breaches in secrecy. The only reason they hadn't made any moves so far was because Eggman's presence was now the perfect alibi. Mysterious explosions? One of Eggman's weapons. Strange creatures? Obviously more of Eggman's weapons...probably.

Okay, perhaps using vaguely-understood technology to explain away disasters caused by Magecraft wasn't the best idea. If anything, it was making those in power *more* curious about what was happening.

But the real issue now wasn't what was happening now. It was what Bazett was supposed to do later. As an Enforcer of the Mage's Association, Bazett had "erased" potential sources of exposure. She had sought out those with Sealing Designations and delivered them to the Clock Tower. All without hesitation.

But that was all before she had met Amy. Before the pink alien had just exploded into her world, saved her life, and pestered her with stories of her own world. before she had incessantly spoken of freely showing kindness and love. Compared to her own life, the world they were living in now...

It's only going to be a matter of time before the Lords of Clock Tower come to a decision, Bazett thought, Even if they decide not to harm Fuyuki, there's no chance they'll allow Amy and her friends to keep exposing themselves. Amy, Sonic, Tails, and Knuckles...if they can't find their way to their world soon, I'll have to bring them in...

Bazett tried to push that possibility down. Amy had become her friend, and the idea of sending her to Clock Tower to be dissected was revolting to conceive. However, thinking about the sheer havoc Sonic and his friends would bring upon the Mage's Association lifted her spirits, just a bit.

They'd probably bring the entire organization down, too, Bazett snickered at the thought. Serves those stuck-up fogies right...

"Hey!" Amy shouted suddenly, causing Bazett to start. "I just realized! We never told Sonic or that Shirou guy about Lancer, and that priest!"

Bazett sat up quickly. "Give me your communicator."

In the Fuyuki city Church, Rin was wrapping up her explanation of she had learned from talking with both Saber and Illya. Her audience, Kotomine Kirei, didn't seem to react to any of her words. The most her narrative caused was a slight widening of the eyes once she mentioned Angra Maiyu, but for the most part he was stone faced.

"...And so, that's why we need to put a stop to the War." Rin finished. For some reason, she felt tense. She knew that the Fake Priest would have a rebuttal ready, but that wasn't why. There was just this... *tension* ...in the air.

Kirei nodded, and said, "That is astonishing to hear. While I knew someday someone would protest against the Holy War, I never imagined that it would be you, Rin. Whatever happened to capturing the Grail for your clans honor?"

Rin tried to push back her irritation at the Fake Priest's blatant teasing. "Haven't you been paying attention? The Grail. Is. *Cursed* . Incomplete, it destroyed half of Fuyuki! And Zouken used its leftovers to create the Shadow that nearly overran the city with its monsters. No matter what wish is asked, the Grail will twist it towards destructive purposes," Kirei nodded, although Rin could definitely see he was only doing that to patronize her. Why was he being so difficult? "The only Servants remaining are mine, Saber, Lancer, and Assassin, and he won't last long without a Master. We just need you to contact Lancer's Master and relay this to him. If we can stop feeding the Grail Servants, we can prevent another disaster from," She looked thoughtful. "And maybe afterwards we possibly put an end to the Grail Wars entirely..."

"You make excellent points, Rin," Kirei noted, "But, you have clearly missed something very important in your research."

Rin looked sharply at the priest. "What's that?"

"Just, I have no intention of stopping anything," Kirei then smiled in a way that was both beautiful and hideous. "Save your life."

Rin barely had time to register Kirei's words before what happened next. The head of the church *moved* , and in an instant was directly in front of the Tohsakah heir. And once he was, Kirei slammed his fist into Rin's gut with a powerful strike that would have killed a lesser man. Rin went flying, and would have crashed into one of the pews had Archer not burst in and caught her. The white-haired Servant gently set Rin down. He briefly glanced at his Master, an unsaid "Told ya so" in his eyes, which Rin didn't have the wherewithal to meet. Once he was sure that Rin wasn't going to die, Archer stood up and glared daggers at Kirei.

"Well, Servant Archer," Kirei greeted cordially, as if he hadn't assaulted a teenaged girl mere seconds before. "I shouldn't have to remind you that Servants are forbidden to enter the church."

"You should work on enforcing that rule," Archer replied, and half-shouted, "Right, Lancer?!"

Kirei blinked, a rare look of surprise on his face as Lancer appeared next to him. However, the confusion was quickly replaced by annoyance as the Fake Priest worked out the source of Archer's information. Lancer, on the other hand

"I see you've been talking to Sonic." Kirei supposed.

Archer shrugged. "Among others."

"Such as..." Kotomine began

Archer couldn't help but notice that Lancer's attention seemed...torn. Very, very quickly, his eyes would dart towards a spot on the floor. Always that same spot. And he had a calculating expression on his face, weighing unknown options.

Rin, how well can you move? Archer sent to his Master.

I've been better, but I can move. Rin sent back.

Good. Make a run for it. I'll hold them off for you.

What?!

It'll be hard enough fighting them and watching your back at the same time, Archer explained, Go!

"So, let me see if I have this right," Lancer suddenly said, cutting into everyone's thoughts. "It's time for us to *kill* these two?"

Kirei's smug smile returned. "Of course. Isn't that what you wanted? To finish your fight with Archer?"

"I know what *I* want, but I need to know what *you* want, *Kotomine Kirie*," Lancer said firmly, "Is it your plan to kill *Tohsakah Rin* and her *Servant*? Do you want me to do both, or are you going to *kill her Yourself*?"

Was it Archer's imagination, or was Lancer speaking louder than usual? Why was he putting emphasis on certain words? If his goal was to annoy Kirei, then it was working like a charm. The smug smirk had collapsed into her another annoyed frown. Clearly, this wasn't going the way the priest wanted. But he quickly regained his composure. And his smile seemed even evillier than it had been before.

"I forgot what a ladies man you pretend to be," Kirei said, "Don't worry, I won't have you sully your Noble Phantasm with the blood of an innocent maiden. *By the power of the Command Seal, I order to you to kill Archer, and then, yourself.*"

Lancer let out a yell of discomfort, and his arms began to shake as his spear appeared in his hands. Slowly and awkwardly, Lancer began to approach Archer, leaning back as if invisible strings were moving his limbs. But his resistance didn't last, and the Spearman was rocketing at his target at full force. Archer pushed Rin away and brought up his own swords in time to block the spear, and the two became locked.

"If you were going to betray him, you should have just killed him," Archer hissed, "You didn't have to be a prick about it!"

Lancer grunted. "Just...covering my bases! Make sure your Master doesn't say anything incriminating...!"

Lancer swung his spear downward, throwing Archer off-balance, and kicked at him. Archer rolled back at the blow and leapt at the rafters. Projecting a bow, he fired a Projected sword at Lancer, but it was narrowly dodged as the Spearman charged up at him. The space between the two warriors became filled with a rapid-fire clash of blades as Lancer stabbed and Archer parried.

Down below, Rin found herself facing Kotomine Kirei, who advanced on her with shoulders hunched ominously. The treacherous priest reached into the folds of his robes and pulled out a black key that in his hands looked more like a dagger. Perhaps a little too late, Rin remembered that the man she had covertly insulted and disdained for many years had once been an Executioner, a member the Holy Church's division that hunted down and destroyed Dead Apostles. She reached towards the communicator.

"I hope," Kirei said evenly, "You can last a bit longer than your father did, Rin."

Rin began to see red. She forgot about the communicator. She whipped out the Azoth Blade and lunged. This was a definite mistake, but Rin was too consumed by anger to care. As much as she disdained Kirei's mannerisms, his betrayal had cut her. And his casually callous remark about her father set those hurt feelings ablaze.

Yet despite that, Rin's form was as impeccable as she swung a roundhouse kick, intent on taking the Fake Priest's head off. It was no good, however. Kirei easily ducked under her attack and punched her hard in the side. Rin was better prepared for that, but it still hurt, and it still knocked her. As she recovered, Rin saw that Kirei was

moving purposely slow as he approached her. She whipped out her Azoth Sword, but Kirei just laughed.

"You don't truly believe *that* will make any difference, do you?" Kirei asked with dark amusement.

The two began to fight again, and it was obvious that, being stronger and more experienced, Kirei was going to win. He easily blocked and countered her attacks, and the Tohsakah Mage kept getting pushed back. Nonetheless, she refused to give up, and kept pressing her assault. All round them, Archer and Lancer were engaged in a high-speed battle that seemed to be destroying the church faster than it would either of them. Pews were carved up, walls were knocked down, and depictions of God were technically desecrated

"It was you," She hissed, trying to block out the pain as Kirei struck one of her joints. " *You* killed my Father!"

Kirei shrugged, but he still smiled as if congratulating Rin for figuring it out. "You say it like it was some grand feat. In truth, Tohsakah Tokiomi practically gave me the chance. For all of his skill and knowledge in Magecraft, he never understood his own student. He never even bothered to connect to with his Servant, much less learned that the Grail he sought had already become corrupted. Of course, one shouldn't expect much from a man who gave his daughter to Matou Zouken."

Rin seethed at these jabs, but she knew by now that attacking in a blind rage was exactly what the priest wanted. An idea came to her, and she fired one of her few remaining *Gandr* at a light fixture near Kirei's head, causing a blinding flash that forced his eyes shut. He instinctively brought his arms up in defense. Rin was already running towards him on Reinforced legs, the Azoth Sword ready to pierce flesh.

Meanwhile, at a relatively isolated corner of the church, Archer and Lancer continued their rapid-fire exchange of thrusts, parries, and

enough near-misses that would make Imperial Stormtroopers green with envy. And the most aggravating thing to Archer was that, even though Lancer's heart wasn't in it, their fight was even harder than it had been at the beginning of the War. Was it the power of a Command Seal, or had Kirei's Absolute Order separated the Hounds physical limitations from his mental inhibitions? Either way, Archer couldn't let this go on. Once he reached the limits of his own Mana supply, he'd have to dip into Rin's, and with Kirei on the warpath, it wouldn't have pleasant to results for his Master.

But unpleasant results were all Rin had. Just as the tip of her blade struck Kirei's arm, the priest suddenly leaned back, shot his foot out and kicked Rin's ankle's. Rin fell, but before could correct herself, Kirei slammed his fist into her arm, causing her to drop the Azoth Blade. Rin cried out in pain and let go of her sword, which Kirei snatched up.

"Very clever... You almost had me," The Fake Priest hissed, "But I'm afraid 'Almost' only counts in Horseshoes, not the Heavens Feel."

There was the sound of glass shattering, followed immediately by something round and blue slamming into Kirei's face. The priest went tumbling back, crashing into a few pews that had been spared from being Archer and Lancer's collateral damage. Sonic landed back by Rin's side, and he began to help her up.

"Are you okay?" Sonic asked worriedly.

"I'm better than I would have been otherwise," Rin said, "How did you know I was in trouble?"

"Amy called me," Sonic explained, "Her friend Bazett is Lancer's original Master."

To his credit, Sonic did not even bother even with an implied, "I told you so". All he cared about right now was taking down the creep responsible for much of the city's suffering. He handed Rin a few Rings and then turned to face Kirei.

Meanwhile, Kirei had recovered quickly enough. The War Overseer was standing up, and glaring daggers at Sonic, both hands holding a black key.

"I'm becoming truly aggravated by these violations," He said darkly, "And that window was expensive."

Rin glanced back, and saw that there was a Hedgehog-shaped hole in one of the stained-glass windows. The rest of the window fell to pieces shortly after.

"Tell you what, why don't I give you my insurance info?" Sonic responded.

Sonic launched himself at Kirei in a burst of speed. Kirei responded by throwing his keys at the Hedgehog, but Sonic dodged by jumping into the air, then struck Kirei with a Homing Attack. Thanks to watching Sonic fight through Lancer, the priest was able to see the attack coming and tried to dodge, but even the force of a glancing blow sent Kirei flying again.

Damn it...he's faster than Kiritsugu ever was! Kirei thought, and reached into his pocket. He pushed a button. *There's no way I can beat him on my own, and I've already ordered Lancer to kill himself after he kills Archer...*

"I'm guessing you were after the Grail's wish for yourself," Sonic assumed, "I don't suppose it matters that the Grail will destroy the world no matter what you ask for, does it?"

"He wants it to happen!" Rin shouted as she channeled the energy of the Rings to heal herself.

Kirei saw a chance to bid for time. Shrugging off his pain, he also shrugged theatrically and began to elaborate, "The Holy Grail is a creation of God. If its purpose is to burn the world...who are we to defy it? Destruction...creation...they are two halves of the same coin.

And perhaps that is the Final Judgement that awaits all of mankind...retribution for the sinful lives that they have lived."

Sonic stared at him through half-closed eyelids. "I'm assuming no one's told you that the Grail was made by wizards, not God."

As Kirei shot Sonic an aggravated look, Rin resisted the urge to laugh. For the first time, she truly understood what it looked like when she and Sonic argued. Of course, the body spasm only served to make her injuries hurt more, but she considered the pain to be a fair trade.

Sonic rushed at Kirei, and narrowly ducked under a kick the priest tried to land on him. Jumping up, Sonic swung a punch, but even with his speed Kirei was able to catch it and use the momentum to throw Sonic against at the Archer-Lancer duel. Spotting Sonic out of the corner of his eye, Archer shifted his feet so as to lead Lancer into the path of the flying Hedgehog. Lancer's Protection From Arrows activated, and he spun his spear to deflect Sonic. Sonic ricocheted off of the spear, shot up towards the ceiling, bounced off several rafters before slamming back down into Kirei's back. Kirei was knocked flat on his face, but when he recovered, all he could see was a spinning blue ball flying straight towards him.

Then there was a flash of gold and suddenly Sonic was knocked out of the air, several of those golden Rings erupting from his body. Sonic managed to grab about six Rings before they all vanished, then looked behind him, as did Rin and Kirei. Even Archer and Lancer, still locked in a mutually-unwanted duel, managed to spare a glance at the entrance of the room.

Standing in the door way, dressed in very casual (But still obscenely expensive) clothing was none other than the golden warrior from the Ryuudou Mountain. His hair was not standing upright, but there was no mistaking that smug smile or those ominous red eyes.

"Well, this *is* a surprise," Gilgamesh remarked, glaring holes at Sonic. "I was planning to stop by your little hiding place, and yet here

you are," He then gave Kirei a withering glance. "I told you to leave this one to me, Kotomine! Are you trying to steal my vengeance!?"

Kirei pulled himself up, trying to regain his composure. "I assure you, it was completely unintentional. He just burst in here completely unannounced and assaulted me."

Gilgamesh shrugged dismissively. "Yes, I am very familiar with this one's lack of decorum."

Oh yeah, Sonic thought sarcastically, That sneak attack was the pinnacle of manners.

Archer hissed in frustration. *Dammit! What's Gilgamesh doing here!? Just when it looked like we were going to get out of this...* He shouted, "Sonic! You can't defend Rin and fight Gilgamesh!"

"Who?"

Archer ducked under one of Lancer's thrusts and punched him in return. " *Just grab Rin and go!* "

Rin gasped. She had never heard Archer sound so desperate before. And she knew exactly what he was asking. Sonic was to take her and he would stay behind to hold all three back. But doing so would kill him!

"Absolutely not!" She cried, standing up. "There's no way we're leaving you on your own here!"

"Of that, you are absolutely correct," Gilgamesh sneered, "After entering, I took the liberty of wrapping this building in my holy chain, *Enkidu* . Doors, windows...every possible opening on the surface is completely sealed off.

" *None* of you are going to leave."

To be continued_

Tiger Dojo

Taiga: Lights! Camera! Action! It's the *Tiger Dojo* , filmed in front of a live-studio audience! Hosted by me, Fujimura Taiga!

Illya: And you're Number 1 Student, Illya, is here as well! Welcome to our show!

Taiga: Wow! I can't believe that we're finally at the confrontation with Kirei.

Illya: Rin was so stupid. Archer told her that Kirei was a villain, and she went in anyway.

Taiga: As her teacher, I can safely assert that Rin is not stupid, but she can also be stubborn. She doesn't like to admit error. Plus, Kirei was a friend of her father's. It was hard admitting that the person she admired was wrong about one thing, and seeing he had been in error about another would be twice as hard.

Illya: You're talking about Sakura, right?

Taiga: But now, we must get to the questions. Number 1 Student! Please read us the first request!

Illya: Code Geass Zero asks, "What would happen if Berserker Lancelot meets Shadow the Hedgehog?" Zero Berserker might attack Shadow, but nothing major.

Taiga: Hmm? But Lancelot mistook Sonic for Saber, didn't he?

Illya: When Sonic was pulled into his world's legend of King Arthur, it imprinted Arthur's image inside of his soul. The Lancelot he met in that world was identical to Shadow, but this was only because of the result of Sonic becoming King Arthur. If Lancelot met the real-world Shadow the Hedgehog, he would only find Shadow confusing because he's from another world.

Taiga: Our next question comes from Lucius Tiberius, and they ask, "Does the Chaos Emeralds have the power to give flesh and blood to a servant?"

Illya: Nope! The only thing that can give a Servant flesh and blood is the Holy Grail. The Chaos Emeralds might be used to create a Holy Grail, and maybe all seven could help extend a Servant's time in the material world. But without a path to the Greater Grail, they'd still be just Servants.

Taiga: And finally, our last question: "Why was Knuckles had trouble to deal with Iskander?", by Magni Thorson.

Illya: Normally, Knuckles would have the same amount of success fighting Zero Rider as Sonic did fighting Fate Lancer. But the Zero Servants were summoned into the world by Avenger, who was absorbing energy from the Chaos Emeralds. That energy increased their abilities, which was more obviously demonstrated by Zero Berserker.

Taiga: Indeed, no outcome is certain when the Chaos Emeralds are in play. Well! That's about all the time we have left. I will see you at the next practice!

Illya: Goodbye, everyone!

Flow of Cause and Effect

Chapter 24: *Flow of Cause and Effect*

Bazett ran. She ran without paying mind to the people out on the sidewalks. She ran with such a gait that an Olympic athlete would be jealous. And she ran without realizing that an unmarked van was trying very hard to follow her through the streets. Only the fear of drawing unwanted attention kept her from strengthening her legs for greater speed.

When Amy had called Sonic and Shirou about Kirei, she and Bazett learned from Shirou that the Master of Archer had been summoned to the church. Justifiably worried, Bazett had taken off for the church herself. Shirou and Saber had agreed to meet up with her, while Sonic didn't even bother to say anything. He hung up and it was assumed he'd already be there to help Rin and Archer against Kirei and Lancer.

When she got to the church, she saw that inside the Boundary Field that the building was completely covered. Once she got closer, she that it was chains. Every wall, every window, and every possible doorway was covered by a layer of chains, each link with two small spikes sticking out.

"Bazett!"

Bazett turned and saw Shirou and Saber running up towards her. While Shirou looked a bit winded from sprinting, Saber showed no sign of fatigue. Looking up, Shirou gasped when he saw the amount of metal wrapped around the church.

"It was like this when I got here," Bazett explained, "I have no idea what these are. They definitely feel like Magecraft, but I haven't been able to examine it further."

"Let me," Shirou offered, stepping forward.

Shirou went up to the building and held out his hand towards the chains. He took a deep breath to compose himself, and then touched a link. He immediately repositioned his hand so it wasn't near one of the spikes.

" *Trace On. Structural Analysis.* "

Information flowed into his mind, but it was too much. Shirou gasped at what he learned, and backed away from the chains. His body shook, the hand he touched the chain with shook even more.

"What is it, Shirou?" Saber asked.

"It...the chain is called *Enkidu* ," Shirou explained, forcing himself to speak. "It's a Noble Phantasm...summoned by Gilgamesh," He looked at Saber, his eyes wide. "That Servant who appeared in Mt Ryuudou is Gilgamesh."

Saber gasped, and after a moment, so did Bazett. The "Epic of Gilgamesh" was one of the oldest myths in human, reaching descending from ancient Babylonia. For Servants, their overall strength was based in how far back the legends they were based on go. The implications were obvious; The Archer from the Fourth War was one of the *strongest Servants in the War*.

And he was in the church while Rin and Archer were dealing with Kotomine.

"Do you think Sonic got in before Gilgamesh did?" Shirou asked, desperate for a sense of hope.

"I know he did," Saber responded resolutely, "If he's not out here, then he's in there," She nodded at the contained church. "I can hear them fighting from hear. Such movements can only be caused by someone with either Sonic or Lancer's speed."

Shirou Reinforced his ears. He *could* hear noises, although they were too frantic and mixed to pick apart.

"Well, that doesn't do us any good," Bazett said, "We need a way to get in here too!"

Shirou looked about. "Maybe...maybe there's a secret passage. It would explain how Kotomine escaped when Caster attacked him."

"There's no time for that." Saber declared, and unsheathed her sword. She dispersed with the Invisible Air. She needed to conserve her Prana, and Bazett had already seen the sword's complete form. "Shirou. Can your *Structural Analysis* tell us how strong that chain?"

Shirou tried to sort out the rush of information that had invaded his mind. It was if the chains themselves had been bragging about their strength and history. He then realized what Saber was getting at. "Saber, no! You'll destroy the entire building!"

"I am not planning to invoke my Noble Phantasm," Saber assured him, raising her sword over her head. "However, I feel we have no time for subtleties. Shirou! Tell me how much force I should use to destroy this obstacle!"

Seeing the seriousness in her eyes, Shirou nodded and took hold of the chain. Invoking his magecraft once again, he searched for the knowledge he and Saber needed.

"It's the chain that Gilgamesh once used to corral the 'Bull of Heaven' that caused a famine in Uruk for seven years."

"It's indestructible?!" Saber asked worriedly.

Shirou paused as he Analyzed the chain. "...I think so, but only to those with Divine origins. To anyone else, it would just be a strong chain."

Nodding, Saber raised her sword over her head. Shirou and Bazett ran back so as not to get in her way. With a yell, Saber brought her sword down and chopped at the chains barring the doors. Ethereal sparks flew as Excalibur met Enkidu, but the links would not yield to Saber's strike. Behind the chains, the force of Saber's attack demolished the doors to the church, which was little good as there were still ropes of linked metal barring the way. Gritting her teeth, Saber pushed pushed further. Although Enkidu did not break, force of the sword began to push the chains down, creating a gap.

"Just...a little...further..." Saber grunted. Sweat began to

Saber can't do it... Shirou realized, Because she's linked to me! If only I had a way of to help...and while I'm at it, I wish I had Berserker's strength, too...

An idea came to Shirou, and he held out his hand. *I am the _ of my sword...*

The image of a familiar stone sword appeared in Shirou's hand. Shirou knew it well, having almost died by it several days ago. (It felt like it had been longer.) As the weapon wielded by Herakles began to materialize, Shirou already knew that its weight would overwhelm him. He raised it over his head and charged at the church's door.

Inside the church, the battle had turned towards the direction expected with Gilgamesh's presence. Terrible. Archer and Lancer were still locked in combat and Sonic was running everywhere to dodge Gilgamesh's attacks, the sacred swords being fired from his Gate of Babylon were always just one step behind. Once in a while, Sonic would find an opening and land a hit on Gilgamesh, but these were far and few between. If there was a upside, it was that the ever-shifting battles made it difficult for Kirei to get reach Rin, who recovered enough to keep moving herself. It was frustrating for the Fake Priest, who was both forced to wait on the sidelines for a chance to move, while also watching his church be slowly destroyed.

"Hey, I don't suppose either of you genius' are aware," Sonic called out at one point, "But if the Grail destroys the world, you'll go with it!"

But Gilgamesh just laughed. "You underestimate me, rodent. The King can survive anything. And if you are trying to move my servant with some droll speech...well, if even his own father could not understand him, how could you?"

Great, it's bad enough he's trying to kill me, but he's gotta bore me to death with a monologue too, Sonic thought as he did a somersault over a cursed battle axe, or something. (It was hard to tell when they were flying at you in a burst of golden light). *Can't these guys just write an autobiography and be done with it?*

Sonic ran along the walls as sacred blades, famous spears, and other legendary weapons impacted the space just behind him. Sonic then saw Kirei make his way towards Rin, and changed his direction. Kicking off of the wall, Sonic raced in between the two Masters, which caused both of them to be separated by the line of fire that happened seconds later. The force of the blasts knocked both of the humans back. As Rin righted herself, her face suddenly scrunched up in thought as she received a telepathic message from Archer. She glared intently at the Overseer.

"You *get off* on causing people pain!?" Rin shouted accusingly at Kirei.

Kirei frowned, both in confusion at Rin's suddenly understanding of his core self, and also at how coarsely it was expressed. And how did she figure it out? So far, Kirei had not mentioned anything that could lead to such a conclusion.

"I suppose that is one way to define it," Kirei said, trying to get back into his usual mode. "For as long as I can remember, my life has been empty, and without meaning. Only one thing gave me a sense of fulfillment...the pain and deaths of others. Isn't it strange? I know it to be wrong, but it felt so right. Such a contradictory existence is... confusing, though. How can I love causing suffering, and yet have

the self-awareness of its immorality? Eventually, I came to the conclusion that the Holy Grail would have the answer. It is of divine nature, yet exists to bring suffering. Perhaps that will solve the riddle of-

Kirei didn't get much further, as Sonic (Who had been racing around the church during all of this) bounced off his head. The Hedgehog's momentum slammed the priest face-first into the floor, ironically saving Kirei from being obliterated by one of Gilgamesh's swords.

"Serious!?" Sonic shouted as he zigged and zagged, "You're messed up, you know you're messed up, and your plan to deal with that is to hijack some kind of magical contest to destroy the world?" He paused to slide under a pew that had been overturned. Said pew was instantly vaporized by sword impact. "And you *really* think that's *easier...* than going to a shrink?"

Rin watched as Kirei slowly lifted his head off of the ground. The expression on his face was not remotely pleasant. Clearly, having his grand motivation dismissed so readily was not something Kirei appreciated...and being used as a stepping-stone didn't help, either. If the situation wasn't so dire, Rin would have laughed at the sour exasperation evident on the priest's face. Instead, Rin decided that to take what chance they had of surviving and charged. Archer and Lancer were still fighting, but if Lancer's Master were to die.

Meanwhile, Gilgamesh frowned as he watched Sonic narrowly dodge and evade his attacks. Clearly, he had underestimated the off-worlder's speed and agility. It was plain to see that clearly more effort would be required if he wanted Sonic brought down quickly. And as humiliating putting such work in for someone as lowbrow as Sonic, the time of a king were better spent on other ventures, not wasted on mongrels like the Hedgehog.

But before Gilgamesh could put in that effort, the doors to the church suddenly exploded open. Links of chain scattered onto the floor and mixed with the debris. Gilgamesh felt his ire rise from the destruction

of his sacred chain, and he forgot about Sonic for a moment. The three figures that rushed in quickly took his interest.

Two of them were Saber, and her half-assed mage of a Master. But the third he did not recognize. It was a woman, but she was dressed in a man's suit so Gilgamesh almost mistook her for the wrong gender. Her short, red hair also didn't help in that regard. On her ear (And Gilgamesh didn't pick up on this until much later) was an earring that was identical to the one Lancer wore.

Off to the side, his spear locked with Archer's swords, Lancer gaped at the newcomer. Only the power of Kirei's Command Seal kept his body fighting. His head, however, was bug-eyed and stammering.

"B-B-B- *Bazett!*? " Lancer cried in shock.

Bazett looked towards Lancer, and smiled in relief at seeing her former Servant. A cry of pain drew her attention, however. Rin's attempt to finish off Kirei had failed, and she was now lying on the floor while he stood over her. A Black Key could be seen sticking out of her thigh. Bazett's eyes narrowed and she tore at the priest with a fierce expression.

" *Kotomine!* " She yelled, her speed enhanced by rune-empowered legs.

Gilgamesh rolled his eyes. "Let us use our indoor voices, please." He said, and fired a sword at Bazett from the Gate of Babylon. Before it was halfway across, Saber was already in front, smacking it aside with her own sword. She fixed Gilgamesh with a glare that caused him to smile as he enjoyed the defiant look in her eyes. Shirou, meanwhile, ran to help Sonic, who was now standing awkwardly upside-down against a wall while a bunch of swords were pinned around him in an outline.

"Are you all right?" Shirou asked, concerned. He began to help Sonic right-side up.

"Just my pride," Sonic grunted, "Plus, blood's starting to go in my head. How's Rin?"

"You tell me," Sonic said, pointing shakily.

Shirou looked and felt a jolt of fear. Kotomine was standing over Rin, and moving in for the killing blow! He quickly Projected a bow and let an arrow flew, but it did not good. Kirei easily blocked it with some sort of black key. Shirou gritted his teeth. He needed to use something stronger, but by the time it reached it would be too late for Rin. Sonic could make that distance, but he was still a bit dizzy from blood rush.

Archer, still trapped in his duel with Lancer, could only watch in horror as Kirei brought his weapon down onto Rin. He let out a cry of anguish as he watched the black key reach the forehead.

" *Fragarach!* "

Shirou saw it. Archer saw it. Sonic saw it. Lancer saw it. There was no way for anyone to reach Kirei in time to save Rin. Her time had run out. But the tool Bazett wielded, the ancient Noble Phantasm called "The Retaliator", could cross that distance. In fact, when Bazett unleashed it, Kirei had already killed Rin. But when the Fragarach had been released, it crossed time, to the moment before the key had struck.

Kirei only had enough time to look at the stunned expression on Rin's face, feel a great pain where most of his chest used to be, and then register the chill in his body before everything went dark for him. Rin watched as Kotomine Kirei's body just collapsed. Shaking, she reached up to touch her forehead. For some reason, she had this sneaking suspicion that there should have been something sharp jammed into it. It was an uneasy feeling. She looked down at Kirei's corpse. He, the man who looked after her following her family's death, the man who *caused* her family's death (She couldn't prove anything, but she bet her mother's demise was linked to him, she

just knew it), was now dead on the floor. It happened so suddenly that she had trouble comprehending it.

"Are you all right- *Yah!* " Bazett didn't have time to finish her question, as Lancer had scooped her up in his arms and was immediately carrying her out of the church. With Kirei's death, the Command Seal's power had vanished as well.

"I can't believe you're alive!" Lancer said as he ran, "I thought Kirei killed you for certain!"

"Lancer-! Put me down!" Bazett briefly squirmed, but then realized A) it felt pretty good and B) if she fell out of his grip the momentum would bring her closer to death than amputation nearly did.

"Not a chance!" Lancer said, "I'll explain later! Right now, we need to get as far away from that building!" He glanced back, "When Kotomine died, the Boundary Field went with him, and it's not going to be long until that church gets visitors...and they won't be looking for a sermon..."

Whatever warm fuzzy feeling Bazett got in Lancer's arms, it was replaced by confusion as she regarded her Servant suspiciously. "What are you getting at..."

Back at the church, Shirou was quick to go to Rin's aid. As he did, Saber, Archer, and Sonic quickly formed a wall, ready to counter anything Gilgamesh would throw their way. Who knew how the living Servant would respond to having one of his allies killed?

But the King of Heroes did not seem entirely bothered by Kirei's death. Or, more accurately, he regarded Kirei's death with the same amount of bother he gave anything that bothered him. At most, all he did was narrow his red eyes and frowned. It was hard to tell if he was truly upset at the death of a decade-long cohort, or just annoyed at the loss of a minion.

"Well, this is rather inconvenient," Gilgamesh remarked, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "I planned to have Kirei officiate my wedding, but now I'll need to find a replacement, thanks to that woman. And Lancer has gone rogue as well, like the stray dog that he is."

No one said anything. Once he was sure that Rin wasn't seriously harmed, Shirou Projected a pair of swords identical to Archer's. But Gilgamesh just laughed.

"Ahh, it is adorable that you mongrels still think your paltry resistance means anything against my power," Gilgamesh said, "But I think we will have to delay our conflict. These ruins are not worthy of such a finale."

"You are leaving?" Saber asked, keeping a firm grip on her sword.

"Consider yourselves lucky that Kirei's death means I will have to alter my plans," Gilgamesh replied smoothly, "In any case, I have a feeling that this place will become too crowded. But before I go, I have one last thing to say..." He fixed Sonic with a fearsome glare. "Your presence in my world was something I tolerated for the entertainment you provided. But never forget...this is *my* world, and I decide what little time you have left to live."

Gilgamesh turned, and strode off into the shadows of the church's inner sanctum.

"Where's he going?" Shirou asked, "Do you think he has a secret passage?"

"Probably. Should we go after him?" Sonic asked, glancing at the Servants.

"That depends," Archer said, looking at Saber. "Saber, did you bring Avalon?"

Saber shook her head. She had left it inside of Sakura, and she hadn't planned on retrieving it until the girl's recovery had completed.

"We should thank our luck that he decided to leave." Rin said, still looking pained. She was using her own Mana to heal her wounds, but it wasn't going easy. She looked back at Kirei's corpse. Still dead. She looked away.

Shirou also looked at Kirei. It was strange. He had only learned that Kirei really *was* evil, not just a jerk, a short time ago. But he had always had this strange inclination to dislike him. There was something about Kirei's disposition that made Shirou want to oppose him. Well, the priest wouldn't be anyone's worry now. Except maybe God's.

Archer wasn't bothering with Kirei's corpse. Instead, he walked over to a spot on the church floor. Saber and Sonic watched him move, interested. Archer Projected a shovel and began to dig at the floor. The battle had shook the floor's integrity, and Archer was able to push aside the tiles with ease. Frowning, he reached into the hole and pulled out some sort of machine.

"What is that?" Saber asked.

"And how'd ya know it was there?" Sonic added, curious.

"Lancer kept talking about how I should watch what I say while we were fighting," Archer explained, "He kept glancing at this spot, too." *Is this what I think it is?* "Hey, Shirou, make yourself useful and try analyzing this."

Shirou, already on his way over to see what the matter was with Rin, took the device away from Archer and performed his spell. As he did, his eyes widened and his skin paled.

"What? Is it a bomb?" Sonic asked.

"...It's a listening device."

"Huh?" Rin and Saber exchanged odd looks. Rin looked concerned, but Saber was confused...for a moment.

"This machine was installed after the robot attacked the church the first time," Shirou explained, "It's been monitoring everything that's happened inside here since then."

"Which means...depending on whatever Kirei was talking about...that gadget probably has more than enough info to someone everything about the Holy Grail War." Rin realized, covering her mouth with concern. Her words caught up with her brain, and she instinctively shot her remaining *Gandre* at the device. Shirou dove away from the explosion to avoid getting hurt.

"Whoa!" Sonic cried, jumping.

"Was that necessary, Rin?" Saber asked.

"We can't take the risk of that information falling into the hands of whoever planted that device," Rin said, "This is the best way to be sure. Now we don't have to worry about whoever recorded our conversations being able to know about the Heaven's Feel." She crossed her arms, a triumphant smile on her face.

"But, Tohsaka..." Shirou said awkwardly, "They probably already know."

Rin blinked. "Huh?"

Sonic reached into the shattered remains of the device and held up a piece. "I'm no electrician, but I'm pretty sure this used to be an antenna."

" *Huh?* "

Shirou nodded sadly. "That's what I was going to say. There was a transmitter installed into the device as well."

" *Huh?!?* "

"That's why Lancer took Bazett," Saber realized, "He knew that the church was being monitored, and so he drew her away from the

battlefield..."

"While leaving us to take the brunt of it," Archer growled, a headache forming. "This could only happen to us."

"So, what are we going to do?" Shirou asked, still uncertain.

"We're going to leave," Rin declared, "And we're going to track down whoever made that device, find out how much they know, and..."

It was at that moment that dozens of armed soldiers suddenly rushed into the church. Before long, the five of them were surrounded by guns

Rather than just waiting at the motel for Bazett or Sonic to get back to her, Amy decided to take her Chaos Emerald to the mansion Sonic had described so that it could be secured. When she got there, she found that it was anything but secure. At least, that's what Knuckles was saying as he forcibly loaded the *Tornado* .

"That creep from the Temple knows we're here," He was saying as he tossed a dufflebag into the baggage compartment. "We gotta move before he attacks."

From what Amy had heard, "That creep" was the same man who had accosted Bazett and herself when they tried to attack Kirei at the church.

"But how could he have found out?" Tails asked, "We've done a pretty good job of hiding...haven't we?"

"Well, he *is* magic," Amy considered thoughtfully, "Maybe he used a crystal ball?"

"I don't that matters at this point," Knuckles decided, throwing the case with the Chaos Emeralds into the plane. "We can't take the risk

of the Chaos Emeralds falling into his hands. Look at the damage they've caused because of this world's wizards and monsters."

"True," Tails agreed, "Maybe we could go to Illya's Castle for now. That's a secure location, and a ways from the city."

"Hold on, isn't that the same castle Eggman wrecked?" Knuckles asked, raising an eyebrow. "What makes it secure?"

"It's not," Tails admitted, "But Illya's family can afford to fix it if there's another attack."

That was accepted as good a reason as any. From what they had all heard, not only did the Einzbern Family have money to burn, but they probably didn't deserve the money that they had. Illya briefly mentioned in passing what growing up in that household had been like, and her words did not give them a pleasant outlook.

"Shouldn't we wait until Sonic gets back?" Amy asked.

"We'll tell him what's happening with our comms," Tails answered, "He can meet up with us once he's done with that evil priest."

Tails flew into the *Tornado*'s cockpit and began to do a pre-flight check of the bi-plane's systems. Amy went to help Knuckles load the baggage compartment by tactfully explaining that punching the bags wouldn't make them fit easier. Once all systems checked out, Tails reached for his communicator to make the call.

Still, we've been so busy dealing with all of this magic stuff, I can't but wonder what Eggman is up to, Tails thought, *He's been pretty quiet lately.*

As it turned out, Eggman was currently up to figuring out what exactly he had captured the previous night. After bringing it to the Egg Saucer, Eggman had the Shadow placed in a special confinement cell and was scanning it endlessly. From what he could

tell, it was mostly liquid, but the substance it was made of matched that of the creatures brought to him in the Egg Pods. He theorized that it was the source of the vile abominations. But it was no longer generating new creatures at the time. Further scans indicated that it had traces of energy from a Chaos Emerald, which Eggman wonder if he was dealing with this reality's version of Chaos Zero.

" Warning: Subject's projected energy levels are dropping. Physical stability is losing cohesion. " The computer reported.

Eggman pushed a button on his console, and a panel opened up on the inside of the container. A single Power Ring came out of it and landed next to the thing. Eggman's Badniks had discovered an entrance to a Special Zone recently, but so far none of the machines that managed to reemerge intact had been able to capture the Emerald. A claw-like hand protruded from the black entity, and it snagged the Power Ring. As it did, it's body shuddered, and a second report came from the computer.

" Update: Energy levels rising. Physical cohesion is stabilizing. "

"So, it needs energy to survive," Eggman mused, twirling his mustache in thought. "I wonder if this is another one of those Servants Shinji mentioned. Didn't he mention something about them needing a Master...?"

Eggman pulled out a tablet and began to open a direct line to Shinji. "Shinji, this is Dr. Eggman. Come in, Shinji!"

After a few minutes of a static, a voice replied to Eggman. It was Orbot. *" This is Orbit. Shinji isn't able to come to the phone right now. Would you like to leave a message? "*

"What? Why not?" Eggman asked, aggrivated. "What's he doing now? Is he *still* showering?"

" Oh, no, sir. He stopped doing that a while ago. Actually, there's been a bit of an update on the situation in Fuyuki... "

"What kind of update?"

The next reply came from Cubot. " *His house exploded.* "

"...What?"

Shinji, as he knew it, was at Rock Bottom. He had no Servant. And he couldn't *get* a Servant because the only person who could have given him one had lost *her* Servant. And there was no way to summon his own because, not only did he have no Mage, but all of the Servants had already been summoned. It wouldn't matter if Eggman's doomsday device or whatever destroyed the other Servants and Masters; Without a Servant, there was no way to get the Holy Grail's wish.

And his home was wiped out too, somehow. That didn't bother him, when he thought about it. Or rather, parts of it did, when he thought about how all of his possessions had been blown up. That bothered him greatly, and caused his mind to heat up like a tea kettle on the stove. But then, those thoughts would be followed by the realization that Zouken had been wiped out as well. Zouken, the grimoires full of spells that Shinji couldn't do, and those horrible bug pits. Especially those horrible bug pits. The thought that he was still alive and his hated ancestor wasn't, it was a soothing concept, and more or less countered the rage and impotence he felt in the face of the *other* bad turns. But not by much.

And so, Shinji was now lying facedown on his motel room bed, his spirit spent on conflicting feelings and telling the police that no, he wasn't *aware* if there had been explosives somewhere on the former property. Next to him, Cubot watched Shinji with an expression that was either confusion or concern. Previously every 8.8 seconds he would poke Shinji in the back, specifically where it met the shoulders. Further off to the side, Orbot was making a report to Dr. Eggman.

"...And so the estate has been completely vaporized." Orbot explained.

" *By what?* " Eggman asked.

"I haven't the foggiest. But in any case, it's gone, along with the library," Orbot paused, "On the plus side, I was able to scan most the grimoires beforehand into the Eggman Electric, as well as a few of the grandfather's magic bugs, so I guess we've already gotten whatever we could from that angle. From what we've heard, authorities are blaming it on you."

" *They can't do that! They can only blame me for things I've actually done!* "

"s'prob'ly the Mages Asso'ation," Shinji mumbled, his voice muffled by the covers. "They blame ev'rythin' on other thin's."

" *What was that?* "

"Shinji, sir," Orbot answered, "He's been a little depressed since his house blew up."

" *Crybaby,* " Eggman sneered, " *I've had plenty of bases blow up, and you never see me whining about it.* "

"What about the time you broke down in tears after Sonic brought down your prison complex?" Orbot asked. There was a noise at the door, but no one noticed.

" *I did not! Who told you that?!* "

"Saw in the archived security files, sir."

" *There's no such file! What is it called?* "

Orbot relayed a series of numbers and letters, and the line went silent. Eggman was cleaely checking it out. At this point, both Shinji (still lying on the bed) and Cubot (still poking Shinji's back) were now

watching Orbot ' s conversation with Eggman via the Eggman Electric. Because of this, no one noticed the door was opening very slowly.

" *You lousy... You knew there was footage of that and you didn't tell me?!* " Eggman screamed, causing Orbot to hastily turn down the speakers volume. " *When I get my hands on you-* "

Orbot quickly broke the connection. "Well, I suppose we're free for the day. What should we do now?"

"Well, I have a few suggestions on our next move."

Shinji, Orbot, and Cubot turned suddenly.

As it turned out, the minute Lancer began shouting about Kirei killing Rin, those in charge of monitoring the listening device had immediately responded by contacting their superiors. Those superiors went above and beyond the call of duty by contacting *their* superiors, as well as local law enforcement. At the same time, the first set of superiors decided to go even further beyond the call of duty and requisitioned the use of a task force to help apprehend Kotomine and deal with the media fallout from arresting a priest.

The second problem lay in the fact that, when arriving at the sight, the forces dispensed to capture Kirei and save Rin from an unpleasant death would inexplicably decide that, there was nothing wrong and they could go home. Naturally, when they were told there that it still sounded like a war was being fought inside the church. So, the attack squad would return to the church, be compelled to leave, only to be told to go back. This went on several times, until eventually the inexplicable compulsion ceased. Once it did, the special forces were able to storm the church just a few minutes after all of the action had ended, along with Kotomine's life.

In hindsight, perhaps killing the guy who maintained the Boundary Field surrounding the church was a bad idea. Archer thought. When

the police and military had arrived, things happened very quickly. Archer just barely had enough time to slip away and take astral form. Saber, lacking that power, was forced to be arrested along with Shirou, Rin, and Sonic. With Rin being too exhausted to cast any hypnosis, the four of them were soundly taken in for questioning. As he watched the proceedings, Archer realized that this was not going to be a normal police investigation. He watched as they were loaded into a truck, and that truck did *not* take them to a police station. It followed a complex route of backroads, turnoffs, and finally ended at a building that, according to the sign, was condemned.

Archer did a sweep of the area. Far from being unused and near destruction, it was a cunningly disguised military complex. There were examination rooms, labs, and communication terminals that would look more at home at the Pentagon. Shirou, Saber, Rin and Sonic were taken to separate quarters and different sections, far away from each other. Archer kept in contact with Rin the entire time, the two of them comparing notes. Being the most injured, Rin was taken to what was clearly a medical bay. The doctor patching her up kept offering her 'painkillers' which Rin tactfully pretended to swallow with some sleight of hand and a little mystical misdirection.

Rin, do I even need to suggest that these people might be the ones spying on the church. Archer reported.

You think? Rin replied, and yelped in pain. *Ow! Stupid iodine! Anyway, see if you can find out where they took Shirou, Saber, and Sonic. Start with Sonic. We can trust Shirou and Saber not to start anything, but Sonic's a whole other story. He'd start a jailbreak for fun, and that's the last thing we need right now.*

Archer, who had been drifting down a corridor in order to memorize the complex's floor plan, felt a rush of wind by his side. Archer's reflexes were just good enough to see a painfully-familiar pair of red sneakers as it darted around the corner. Moments later, a group of soldiers ran by. Judging from their heavy breathes, the chase had been going on for some time.

No doubts there. Archer thought, I'll get back to you, Rin.

Archer raced off, and ghosted past the soldiers. Catching up with Sonic was easier than he expected, as the Hedgehog wasn't running at top speed. It was plainly obvious that Sonic was just toying with the soldiers- He was moving fast enough to stay ahead of his pursuers, but slow enough that they could keep up. The real problem was that Archer needed Sonic to go to an isolated location so he could resume physical form and talk to him. Some planning would be required.

If I wasn't in a hurry, I'd take a few minutes to think. Archer thought, rematerializing. He made sure to place himself in a blind spot on the security cameras. Projecting a Bow, Archer fired a slew of arrows at the lights. As the hallway was filled with darkness, Archer raced ahead of the confused soldiers, grabbed Sonic by the arms ("Hey!") and whispered into his ear, "Ditch these guys and meet me in the bathroom down the hall!"

Sonic nodded, and Archer had to let go to avoid being yanked off his feet by Sonic's abrupt acceleration. He quickly shifted back into astral form and entered the aforementioned restroom. It was empty. He waited by the air dryer, and not for very long. Sonic zipped in, but before Archer could rematerialized and talk, he headed towards a stall. There was the sound of trickling, flushing, and Sonic zipped out to wash his hands. Archer became physical as Sonic went to the dryer.

"Don't tell me," Archer said blandly, causing Sonic to jump. "You were having so much fun you had to pee."

"Actually, I hadn't gone since this morning," Sonic said irritably, "Not all of us are magic ghosts. What's up?"

"Please tell me that there was a point to you leading those guards on a wild chase, besides your own amusement." Archer said bluntly.

Sonic shrugged as he dried his hands. "They took me to some empty room and a guy in a suit started asking me questions. Y'know, where I came from, why I came here, that sorta thing."

"And what did you tell them?" Archer asked.

"The truth," Sonic shrugged. Seeing the look in Archer's eyes, he added, "Don't worry! I didn't mention anything about magic, sheesh!"

"Did they ask anything about Shirou or Rin?"

"No, I left before they got that far."

"Right..." Archer sighed, "I'm going to keep looking around for something we can use to bust out. If you want to help, try to find Shirou and Saber and give them a message. At the very least, we need to get our stories straight."

"Y'know, if these guys were the ones spying on the church, they're pretty much going to know exactly what went on down there," Sonic pointed out, "I mean, at this point, why keep lying?"

Archer didn't have an answer for that.

Shirou was currently in an empty room. He was still handcuffed, sitting at a table. He had at first called out for anyone who might be listening, but his pleas had been ignored. Shirou had been tempted to try and use Reinforcement to increase his strength and break out of the handcuffs, but chose not to. Although he couldn't see any cameras, he had the feeling he was being watched.

I need to play it cool, Shirou thought, Not that there's anything else I can do, right now...

The door then opened, and what looked like an officer came in.

"Hello, Mr. Emiya," He greeted as he sat across from Shirou, "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, but we wanted to make sure everything was arranged before your questioning."

Shirou's brain told him to say something along the lines of, "It's all right" or "Apology accepted," but by the time the words reached his mouth, it became, "Where are my friends?"

The officer adjusted his collar. "Your classmate Ms. Tohsaka is still in the medical ward. She seems to have suffered numerous injuries, and we want to make sure her life is in no immediate danger before we question her. Your...associate, Ms. Saber, is being questioned in another room."

"And what about...that creature?" Shirou almost referred to Sonic by name, but caught himself in time.

"That's none of your business," The officer grumbled, "And wipe that smile off your face!"

"I'm not smiling." Shirou lied, "But, who are you people? This doesn't seem like a normal police station." Shirou thought about what he just said. "Not that I spend a lot of time at police stations."

"I can't give you my name, but you can call me Osamu," The agent said, "But I suppose I should explain that the reason you were taken here instead of the police is due to the delicate nature of the incident. We don't want the death of a priest to be made public until we have all of the facts and made our conclusion. Our agency has been given permission to investigate this incident."

"And what agency is that?" Shirou asked.

"I know you'd rather be at home, so why don't we get right to it." Osamu said, purposely ignoring Shirou's question. Shirou chose not to press the subject. He had a feeling that he needed to proceed with care.

The first part of the questioning went off, in Shirou's mind, swimmingly. He wasn't sure what kind of stories Saber and Rin were telling, so he tried to vague as possible. The agent's face remained as stony as ever, so it was hard to tell whether or not he believed any of Shirou's words. So far, Shirou had not said anything that was *technically* untrue. He and Saber had heard word of Kirei's connection to the serial killer, and went to the church to help Rin. It had already been wrecked when they got there...

Agent Stuart had wanted recommended Shirou being interrogated first for two reasons; One, during his time undercover at Homurahara Academy, he had gotten to know the young man a bit and found him to be a bit more honest than the average student. More specifically, he was considered by all to be a terrible liar. But the second, more important reason was that due to Sonic's breakout, there was a chance that their base might be exposed to the public...or worse, to whatever was disrupting past investigations. While they could hold both Saber and Rin due to their connection with suspected terrorists, Emiya Kiritsugu and Kotomine Kirei respectively, Shirou was a different story. Besides a relatively minor connection to the Fujimura Group, his record was clean. They needed to get whatever Shirou had as soon as possible.

So far, Shirou had been very cagey with answers. Very vague, but hard to dispute. Stuart turned on his microphone. Speaking very softly, he said, "Ask about Rin."

&Break&

"...So, what do you know about Miss Rin Tohsaka?" Osamu asked.

"...She's a good student and polite classmate," Shirou answered after a moment, "I...She can a bit mischievous at times, but I think she's a good person at heart."

Osamu drummed his fingers on the desk, clearly in thought. Then, he said, "Shirou, I'm going to share something with you. Not long

after the attacks on Homurahara Academy by the terrorist calling himself Eggman, the church Kotomine Kirei maintains was attacked by a similar weapon."

"Really?" Shirou asked, hoping he didn't sound too fake.

Osamu nodded. "Coupled with some...incidents the late Kirei was associated with, we became concerned as to why the church was targeted. Since then we have been monitoring the church for any suspicious activity."

The door opened and a soldier came in, holding something in his hand. He placed it on the table, and Shirou saw that it had speakers and a play button. Osamu pressed the play button.

"This is just one of many conversations we've picked up," Osamu explained, "I normally wouldn't be sharing this with you, but some of the dialogue...could use some context."

The first voice from the recording was Kirei's. *"Ahh, Rin, it is good to see you. For what do I owe this pleasure?"*

The second voice was Rin's. *"This isn't a social visit, Kirei. We've got a serious matter to discuss."*

Kirei: *"...How serious?"*

Rin: *"Holy War serious. I've learned some new information that changes everything. "*

Kirei: *"...Rin, you know that we're supposed to wait until nightfall to speak of that."*

Rin: *"That was before our city was attacked enough times to justify a military presence. And in case you didn't notice, last night I ran into a bunch of soldiers who were camped right outside the edge of a battle."*

Kirei: *"Rin, I understand your concern. But don't worry. The Mage's Association and Holy Church are working to keep our activities from becoming known to the public. It's been a hard... very hard time, but we still have everything under control."*

Rin: *"It's not just the threat of exposure I'm worried about, Kirei. I've recently learned something about the Holy Grail that changes everything about the War. About its nature."*

Kirei: *"What do you mean?"*

Rin: *"It's a time bomb, Kirei. The Holy Grail isn't going to grant anyone's wish, no matter who wins it. Thanks to Avenger's influence from the Third War, the Grail will destroy the planet the minute it is completed. That's why the Grail from the previous War razed Fuyuki. And that was only with the substance of an incomplete Grail. If the current War's Grail reaches maximum power, it'll destroy the planet."* She took a deep breath. *"And so, that's why we need to put a stop to the War."*

Osamu at that point stopped the recording. Looking at Shirou's stunned expression, he said, "Before that, we've had numerous recordings of Kotomine talking with an unidentified man, and frequent mentions of this 'War' and 'Grail', along with an organization that seems to be working outside the law. From what we gather, that same group has someone managed to infiltrate the government to obfuscate any mention of their activities. That's why our agency has to do its work in these secretive conditions. And furthermore, it sounds like whatever project they're working towards is going to cause a disaster on par with the Great Fire of Fuyuki. Now, I doubt you would..."

Shirou wasn't really paying attention anymore. The full scope of the issue was finally known to him. He had

They know, Shirou realized, they know practically everything. The only thing going they don't know is what it all means ...

Shirou wracked his brain for idea, but none came. This was no longer a matter of keeping the big secret- for all intents and purposes, it had already been printed on a billboard, and the billboard itself had been erected on the side of a major roadway. The only reason there was even a questioning was that these agents had no understanding of the context. Holy Grail, Mage's Association... fancy words that meant nothing to them because they didn't know about magic.

But they know enough that they could arrest Rin as a co-conspirator of Kotomine. Shirou realized glumly. Thanks to the recordings of Rin's meetings with Kirei, it wouldn't be hard for them to legally put the screws to her. While the Mage's Association *could* arrange Rin's freedom, there was no telling how much death and property damage that would involve. And these agents, as far as Shirou could tell, were not bad guys. Just trying to figure out who the bad guys *were* .

Shirou wondered what his father would do. From what Saber had described, Kiritsugu would have easily, coldly, torn through the entire agency until the truth had been buried...not much different from the Mage's Association, really. But Shirou remembered how broken and indifferent Kiritsugu had been when his father had discussed his failure to become a hero. Such a ruthless method would have destroyed Shirou's soul if he had to do it.

Shirou then wondered what Sonic would do. The Hedgehog had made it perfectly clear he didn't think much of the rule of secrecy mages were supposed to follow. In fact, he didn't seem to think much of rules in general. He would have, and probably already had, escaped and leave the agents to scratch their heads, for one reason or another. But running away wouldn't solve the problem.

He then wondered what Saber would do. She had been a king, one who's ultra-pragmatic reign had led to a revolt against her...the Battle of Camlann. Her methods had been harsh, fighting to save the nation while ruling it without emotions. She had never hesitated to continue the wars until they ended in victory, no matter the cost. But Shirou didn't want a war.

So...what did *he* want to do?

"Mr. Emiya?" Osamu asked again, "Do you have anything to say?"

"I..." Shirou wanted to answer, but the words were caught in his throat.

Before anything more could be said, the doors burst open. There was a rush of wind and suddenly Sonic was in the room. More specifically, *multiple* Sonic's were in the room. They were all blurry, and each one was doing a different thing. One Sonic was standing on the end of the table, wobbling precariously. One Sonic was flipping through Osamu's papers at lightning speed. Another was fiddling with the recorder. And at least two were playing Cat and Mouse with Osamu and the two soldiers that managed to get in.

This was impossible, of course. But it didn't take a genius to realize that the duplicates were just a visual illusion caused by Sonic high speed and stopping just enough for one image to take hold in Shirou's mind. It *did* take Shirou a moment to realize that something had been pressed into his hand. As all kinds of super-speed shenanigans were being done around him, Shirou saw that it was a piece of note paper. On it was written, "*Shirou, I suppose I don't need to tell you this, but watch what you say. From what Archer tells me, Rin and Saber are going to try and be honest about everything, but they're avoiding any talk about magic. This isn't my world, so I honestly don't know what's the right thing to do here. But I hope whatever you choose to do, it's something you can live with.*"

Unfortunately, the ink hadn't had time to dry before the paper was folded up, so most of the message became smudged. In fact, it looked less like a message and more like a Rorschach test that to Shirou resembled a twisted picture of Saturn.

And the minute Shirou lowered the paper, Sonic was out of the room, leaving behind one very flustered agent as the soldiers regained their bearings and chased him out. It could have been Shirou's

imagination, but he thought he saw Sonic wink at him, faint image fading from his eyes.

And Shirou realized, *I live in a world where that happened.* He came to a decision.

"God, I think it's toying with us, why do I even bother..." Osamu was muttered as he tried to gather up everything.

"Mr. Osamu..." Shirou began, catching the agent's attention.
"There's something I want you to see. *Trace On.* "

Stuart stood up suddenly. A sword had suddenly appeared in Shirou's hand.

Eggman sighed. He had spent his entire day studying, analyzing, and experimenting on the creature. And he was starting to have a good feeling about it. From what he could tell, the creature seemed to have space-time properties. If fed enough energy, he could generate a force equal to Chaos Control. The real question was where to get the power...

Eggman leaned back in his chair and stretched his arms. "Oh, this is exhausting! I need a break."

Eggman stood, and pushed a button. The speakers on his computer began to play music.

" *The story begins with who's gonna win*

" *Knowin' the danger that lies within*

" *Aboard the ARK a genius at heart*

" *Who wanted to unlock the mysteries of life* "

Like all terrible dancers, Eggman thought he was a terrific dancer. And he danced withoutSo any attempt to describe his movements would be an utter crime against humanity that even Angra Maiyu would hesitate to commit.

" I am the Eggman, that's what I am

" I am the Eggman, I got the master plan

" I am the Eggman, that's what I am

" I am the Eggman, with the master plan "

Eggman sashayed, boogied, and hustled. His movements were uncoordinated, lacking in rhythm or timing.

" I'm plotting my schemes wherever I go

" They're perfect in every way

" I'd love to destroy the blue one you know

" He's an obstacle that always gets in my way "

And then Eggman began to moonwalk. Or at least, his mocking attempt to do a moonwalk. And he was really getting into the swing of things when he felt a finger poke him in the side.

"Sir?" Orbot asked.

" *Gah!* " Eggman yelped, and the music cut off. He glared down at the spherical robot. "What do *you* want?! I'm busy!"

"Yes, you certainly look like it," Orbot said diplomatically, "But, I'm afraid to say that you have a visitor who wishes to speak with you."

"I'm busy!" Eggman snapped, before realizing what exactly Orbot had said. "Visitor? What are you talking about?"

Before Orbot could speak, a new figure stepped through the doorway. In one hand he held Shinji, his finger clasped firmly around the teenager's neck. Shinji, for his part, was starting to turn as blue as his hair, and his feet were awkwardly dangling a foot off the ground. Further back, Cubot was watching from behind a corner, shaking.

Gilgamesh said, "I have come to see if your quaint innovations are truly worthy of the king's endorsement.

To be continued_

Tiger Dojo

Taiga: *Aloha*, all children under the sun! Answering your questions by moonlight, it's the Tiger Dojo! I am your instructor, Fujimura Taiga, and here is my Number One Assistant, Illya- *chan* !

Illya: *Onee-chan* , what are you doing? Don't you know that snitches get stitches? I'll have to really reprogram you when you get home!

Taiga: Shirou is a very earnest boy. He just can't lie to the police. What bothers me more is that Gilgamesh and Eggman have had their fated meeting. Could an alliance of evil be in the works?

Illya: If they do team-up, it won't end well for Eggman. His past partners have always betrayed him.

Taiga: Let us get down to the brass tacks! What is our first question, Assistant Number One?

Illya: The first query comes from Lucklash. "Will there be any Servants from other animes appearing?"

Taiga: I hope not! This story has too many characters as it is!

Illya: And there are too many heroines! I haven't had many scenes with *Oni-chan*.

Taiga: Just relax, jealousy does not become a young lady. Our next question comes from Ina, who asks, "Will Sonic meet Merlin?"

Illya: Who knows? It's hard to keep track of what such a trickster will do.

Taiga: Our last question comes from Doortolight47; "What's Sasaki going to do now?" You mean, the Assassin Caster summond?

Illya: That's something to think about. He has no interest in the Grail, and some energy to spend time away from Ryuudou Temple. I think he might just wander erratically until his Mana runs out. Who knows if he'll show up again. Oh, well. If he dies, I'll be the first to know.

Taiga: And that concludes our lesson for today! We will see you at the next practice!

Illya: Goodbye, everybody!

A New Venture

Chapter 25: A New Venture

When the *Tornado* landed at the Einzbern Castle, The second thing Tails, Knuckles, and Amy did was unload the biplane of its cargo and begin setting up a new hideout. The *first* thing they did was give Knuckle and Amy, who had never visited the place before, the chance to see the glorious splendor the Einzberns, a clan of powerful mages, could erect so far from their homeland.

"What a dump." Knuckles commented.

Of course, given that the damage from the time Eggman attacked hadn't been repaired yet, "glorious splendor" was a rather generous term.

"I guess Illya's family haven't gotten around to fixing things yet," Tails said, hovering into the air for a better look around. "At least Sella and Leysritt managed to clean up most of the rubble before they came with us to Fuyuki."

"Well...I'm sure it was probably quite pretty before Eggman came around," Amy said diplomatically, "Let's see if we can get settled in the non-wrecked parts."

Unpacking didn't take long. It was decided that they would leave most of their more important equipment inside the *Tornado* in case they would have to make another fast exit. Because the castle's generator had been turned off (And no one wanted to look and mess with it), they would camp out in the main hall. While Tails and Amy set things up, Knuckles was sent on an expedition to gather firewood for dinner. It wasn't easy. For some reason, the forest was clear of kindling or other pieces of stray wood.

Considering that weird girl had magic maids or something, I wouldn't put it past her to have them clear out her 'backyard' every day just to make it look pretty. Knuckles thought, *Though I gotta admit, it is that.*

As Knuckles trekked, it soon became less about the firewood and more about taking in the surroundings. He realized that he had spent too much time in the city of Fuyuki. He missed the untamed regions of the world, the serene peace of a forest. Knuckles visualized himself relaxing under one of the many giant mushrooms on Angel Island, just waiting for life to go by. The warmth of the Master Emerald...

Knuckles sighed, and shook himself out of it. He had no idea how homesick he was getting. He knew he couldn't let himself go soft, not when the game was reaching the final innings. Glancing up at one of the trees, Knuckles had an idea. He didn't want to restore to chopping down a piece of this beautiful forest, but he figured that the wind may have broken a piece branches. Perhaps a light punch to the trunk would knock them down.

Giving his gloved right a kiss for luck, Knuckles slammed the fist into the tree, making sure to hold back enough not to break anything. A minute later, he pulled himself out of the pile of fallen fruit.

"Unbelievable!" Knuckles grumbled, "Hundreds of trees, and I choose the only one with apples!"

As Knuckles prepared to try his idea on a different type of tree, a faint light reached the corner of his eye. Looking, Knuckles saw something shinning in the distance. There were too many trees in the way to get a good look, but that was easy to fix. Munching on an apple, Knuckles began to weave around the trees to get closer to the shiny thing. It was slow going, and he almost tripped over a few roots, but soon he made it. In the center of a clearing was a giant golden ring, spinning in the air. A portal to a Special Zone.

Knuckles grinned, tossed aside his apple, and then leapt. Both he and the ring vanished.

Knuckles reappeared in a very different world. The ground was a smooth surface, painted in red and yellow squares. All around him were giant balls, most red, but some blue.

Knuckles clapped his hands together. He knew this kind of Special Zone. When he touched a blue ball, it would become red. And if he touched a red ball, the Special Zone would eject him. The problem was, once he began to move, he wouldn't be able to stop. He would only be able to turn and jump.

Knuckles took a step, and sure enough, the momentum began to carry him. Knuckles saw that there were lines of blues mixed with the reds, but chose to ignore them at the moment. Instead, he went for the large groups of blues that were in empty clearings. They were easy to gather, and less chance of accidentally running into a red ball. Once he was done, Knuckles turned his attention towards the blue balls that had been fitted between the large amounts of reds. The lines were not always straight, some of them zigged and zagged, forcing Knuckles to spin on his heels to avoid colliding with one of the red balls. And the speed of his pace quickened, but not by his choice. It was if the world beneath him was beginning to spin. Knuckles pivoted, jumped, and continued to move. He touched more blue balls. Ran away from the red balls.

Unlike most Special Zones, this kind allowed for an infinite amount of time. In theory. In practice, the forced increase in speed meant that it was only a matter of time before a participant would slip up and run into a red ball and be expunged. Adding to the fact that any watch brought inside a special zone would stop working, it was hard to say just how long Knuckles spent running around the Zone touching blue balls. However, in time he was able to successfully tap every blue ball in sight. But there was one problem.

"Where's that stupid Emerald!?" Knuckles yelled, his voice echoing pointlessly into the air.

If he had tapped every blue ball, then the Emerald should have appeared. There had to be a single blue ball left. That was the only

explanation. As Knuckle found himself running faster and faster as he searched frantically, trying to spot a lone blue in a sea of red. But it seemed useless. Knuckles began to sweat as the world around him started to blur.

I'm just going in circles! Knuckles thought, *I have to do something different...*

Out of the corner of his eye, Knuckles saw something yellow out of corner of his eye. He turned abruptly, and found himself being flung into the air. A yellow sphere! Yellow balls were like spring pads, and Knuckles had run right into one. Beneath him was a sea of red dots, and Knuckles knew that when he landed it would be game over. And he wouldn't be able to glide on the air with his quills because the Special Zone's wonky physics wouldn't allow it, for some bizarre reason.

Knuckles grimaced and gritted his teeth. It wouldn't hurt when he landed, but being forced out of the Special Zone after getting so close to getting the Emerald was not an easy feeling to swallow. While the Special Zone's entrance would reappear the next day, it would be *such* a pain to have to traverse the Zone all over again.

But as Knuckle fell, he saw that in the middle of the red balls, there was a single blue ball. The grimace quickly spun into a smile as he went down, and landed right on top of the blue orb. As he did, every single orb in the Special Zone suddenly flew away into the air and out of sight. A new object came down, and landed in Knuckles' hands; the silver Chaos Emerald. It emitted a bright light, and Knuckles found himself back in the Einzbern forest.

"All right!" Knuckles cheered, holding up his trophy in the air. "I found one! Only one more to go!"

It was then that the alert for Knuckle's communicator sounded off. The timing and abruptness startled Knuckles, and he almost dropped the Emerald in shock. After a few seconds of awkwardly juggling the gem, Knuckles answered the hail.

" Hey, Knuckles! " Tails called, " I've got great news! "

"You found the last Emerald?" Knuckles asked.

" That would be pretty great, but no, " Tails replied, " Sonic just called. That evil priest has been beaten, and Rin's okay. "

"So where is he? Why didn't he come back?" Knuckles asked.

" Yeah, he's just settling some things with the cops, and then he'll be right over here. "

"...The cops?"

Shirou's life was in danger. That much was certain to Saber.

Her own interview (Or rather, interrogation) with the government agents had been going well enough. The agent, a Mister Satou, had been questioning her. With her heightened senses, she could hear the questions that were being fed to Satou through the earpiece he wore. Although minuscule, that brief preview gave Saber just enough time to formulate a decent answer that was both technically honest, but easy to misunderstand.

That was, until she had been called into another room, where both Shirou and Rin (Who was looking much better, albeit patched up) were. Saber had hoped that it was tell them that they were being allowed to leave. And as it turned out, they were.

Because Shirou had told the agents everything. *And* did a demonstration of Magecraft, to boot.

So, Shirou and Saber were taken to the medical ward where Rin was being kept, and given the big news from Satou himself.

Once she had gotten over the shock, Saber considered Shirou's decision from a tactical perspective. Essentially, the government had

made huge strides in uncovering the illicit activities happening in Fuyuki through Magecraft, even with the Mage's Association's agents working behind the scenes to cover everything up. And as slow as their progress had been, they *were* making progress. Judging from all of the secrecy the agents themselves used, it was apparent that they suspected coverups were happening. They were taking many precautions and avoiding notice, at least until they had solid evidence to make arrests...but once they did, the Mage's Association would leap into action.

With that in mind, it was understandable that Shirou would prefer revealing the truth on his terms, in a controlled setting. Rather than letting the government come to their own conclusions and make their own interpretation on the matter, Shirou had chosen to warn them of what they were stepping into. It was an understandable, if not naive move. For the most part, from what Satou was saying, Shirou had put more emphasis on the dangerous moves the Association would do, and there seemed to be no imminent danger yet.

That is, until they were released from custody. Then Rin would commit murder, alliance or not.

But Rin wasn't thinking of murder. Oh, she briefly considered killing *someone*, but once what Shirou had done had sunk in, she found that she was...tired. That's what it was. The last few days had been a never-ending attack on the pillars Rin had built up to keep the sorrow from her parents passing. The traditions of heretical Mages were all Rin had for a decade. But things were different now. She had reclaimed her sister. Learning of Archer's plight gave her new insight. He became trapped in an endless cycle from his unyielding dedication to his ideals. Would she suffer a similar fate if she continued her own path?

Rin resolved that no matter what, she would handle it with grace, and only *slightly* injure Shirou when they got home.

Satou continued to speak, "...I would like to say that although we *are* releasing you from custody, we *will* be forced to keep an eye on you,

in case this organization you've mentioned tries to make contact with you."

"How very kind of you," Rin said evenly, "Is that for our protection, or do you need someone to act as bait?"

Satou sighed, "Tohsaka- *san* , I understand that the movie industry has given a rather dramatic view of how a government investigation works, but I can assure you that our goal is only the protection of its citizens, which includes you and Mr. Emiya, here. From what the two of you have described, this..." He sounded uncomfortable. " *Mage's Association* will only be a problem if there comes a risk of the existence of the powers Shirou demonstrated becoming common knowledge. Right now, our biggest concern is the one who's *openly* threatening the city."

"Dr. Eggman." Shirou stated.

Saber asked, "What measures are you taking to deal with him?"

"I'm not authorized to reveal anything," Satou replied, "However, I need to ask you if Eggman knows anything about this...War...of yours. We've noticed that his automated weapons have been constantly seen in the same vicinity as these battles you've had. You can't tell me that's a coincidence."

"It's probably not, but who can figure the reasoning of madmen?" Rin said smoothly.

"The members of the War..." Saber glanced at Shirou, "The *other* members of the War would never reveal its existence to an outsider. And even if Eggman became aware of it, he would be able to claim the Holy Grail without a Servant."

"...And *this* the Badnik production plant." Eggman stated, "Thanks to the miracle of innovation, imagination, and a relaxed attitude towards

building codes, we can imprison animals inside robots at three times the speed of any *other* robot facility!"

"How many factories make their robots like that?" Cubot asked, "I thought it was just us."

Eggman punched Cubot.

Eggman wasn't too happy at the visitor Shinji and the robots had brought to the Egg Saucer. His first instinct had been to summon a cadre of Badniks to deal with Gilgamesh. All it took was the Gate of Babylon opening for three seconds to trash that plan, along with aforementioned robots. Eggman immediately decided that maybe he needed a new partner to move the plan along. Which meant giving Gilgamesh a tour of his Egg Saucer.

The five of them, Eggman, Gilgamesh, Shinji, Orbot and Cubot, were seated in a golf cart, with Eggman at the driver's seat, Gilgamesh riding shotgun, with Shinji and the bots squeezed into the back. It was an awkward ride, what with the cart not being very big, and Gilgamesh's body language stating that he would go on a killing spree if Eggman's shoulder even grazed him. But Eggman stuck it out, even while knocking Cubot off the cart for speaking out of turn.

"With this production plant, restocking our Badnik supply is easy as one-two-three," Eggman continued without missing a beat, "And once they are finished, they go out to find more animals to put in robots, ensuring a steady flow of production."

"Why do you need to put the animals in robots?" Gilgamesh asked.

Eggman tried to speak, but himself floundering. He screwed up his face in thought as he tried to muster an explanation, but Gilgamesh's overwhelming presence was making it hard to think.

Finally, Eggman snapped, "Well, what else am I supposed to do with them?"

That seemed as good an answer as anything, so Gilgamesh didn't say anything. A strange beeping caught his ear, and he glanced over his shoulder. Orbot had some tablet with a gratuitous antenna sticking out, and seemed to waving it in Gilgamesh's general direction. Gilgamesh's eyes narrowed, and over his shoulder, Eggman made a cutting motion under his neck. Getting the drift, Orbot shut off his device, hid behind his back, and smiled as best he could. Gilgamesh rolled his eyes in annoyance and turned his focus back to the tour.

After leaving the factory, Eggman steered the tram down another corridor. After some time, the Egg Tram drove into a wide area with a large variety of flight Badniks, Egg Mobiles, and other units. Egg Pawns were performing general clean-up and maintenance on all docked vehicles and inactive robots.

"This is just one of the Egg Saucer's hanger bays," Eggman explained, "Our best projections show that when loaded to maximum capacity, we will be able to invade and conquer a small country in hours."

"Too bad we can't do anything about Sonic." Cubot sighed. Eggman gritted his teeth and forced a smile, pretending that the yellow robot didn't say anything.

But Gilgamesh just laughed mirthlessly. "Yes, that blue mongrel is quite the pest. I thought that, given your experience, you might aid me in dealing with him."

Grinning with more confidence, Eggman continued the tour. They soon had to park the Tram and continue on foot. Taking a moving sidewalk, Eggman showed off the various engines and oversized gears that turned to keep the Egg Saucer up and running. Unfortunately, due to poor timing, they came by just in time to see a Orbinaut getting crushed between the teeth of two massive cogs. The little birdy that escaped and narrowly suffered the same fate fluttered up left an unpleasant surprise on Eggman's shoulder.

"This...this is why we put animals in robots!" Eggman grumbled, steam emitting from his mustache. As Orbot tried to clean up the mess with a paper towel, the birdy landed in Shinji's hair. Cubot tried to snag it with a butterfly net but all he caught was Shinji's annoyed head.

Gilgamesh said nothing to these antics.

Eventually, Eggman led the group into the Egg Commissary. The various empty tables each had a picture of Eggman's face painted on top, with the exception of a smaller table off in the corner, which had a Crabmeat picture. Shinji and the 'bots were forced to sit there while Eggman and Gilgamesh took one of the 'adult' tables. Loudspeakers softly played a BGM Gilgamesh wasn't familiar with ("Scrap Brain Zone" from *Sonic the Hedgehog*) at a decent volume.

"This is where I like to have lunch, whenever I feel like I've spent too much time in the lab." Eggman explained as a Ball Hog wearing a chef's hat shuffled up to deliver a can of Chao Cola.

Judging by the size of that gut, I'd say you spend a great deal of time here. Gilgamesh, Orbot, Cubot, and Shinji thought at once.

"Care for a bite?" Eggman offered.

Gilgamesh glanced at the menu that had been on the table. The selection looked normal enough...except every item name was preceded by the word "Egg". There were Egg Salads, Egg Burgers, Egg Ramen, Egg Meatloaf...

("The Doc's keeps trying to build his brand, but it's not going so hot." Cubot whispered to Shinji.)

Gilgamesh tossed aside the plastic sheet aside with a dismissive roll of his eyes. "I sincerely doubt anything your toys could prepare would not insult my kingly palate. In any case, I brought my own meal."

A small vortex of golden light appeared at Gilgamesh's side, and out came a vintage *Mobile Suit Gundam* lunchbox, which landed in the blond man's hand. He popped open the lid, and pulled out a neatly-made BLT, wrapped in plastic. As this went on, Orbot waved his device in Gilgamesh's general direction again. On the screen was a single word "ENERGY" with three arrows pointing up. Orbot pushed the "Send" button, and Eggman's watched lit up.

"So, eh, what do you think so far?" Eggman asked awkwardly, covering his watch as casually as he could manage.

"I must admit, your base is quite the technological marvel- compared to this era's crude standards, that is," Gilgamesh replied evenly, "However, you still haven't told me what exactly you plan on *doing*. You send your ridiculous machines to the city, looking for those 'Chaos Emeralds', but for what purpose? Do you have an actual plan, or are you just trying to make everyone's lives difficult?"

Eggman finished off his soda and tossed the can in the general direction of a garbage chute. The can hit Cubot in the head. He fixed Gilgamesh with an evil smirk, and twirled his mustache.

"I'd thought you'd never ask." Eggman said.

"So he told them?" Sonic asked.

"Apparently, according to Rin," Archer replied.

The two of them were hiding out in an unused conference room this time. Sonic was sitting in an office chair, occasionally spinning around in the seat. Archer was standing, but leaning against a wall.

"And she's okay with that?" Sonic asked, raising an eyebrow.

"No," Archer replied, "But she's taking it better than I thought she would."

Archer had been surprised when he learned what Shirou had did. But he had been even more surprised by how Rin was reacting. Rather than thinking about how to neutralize the government men and remove the evidence, she was providing them with more information. Not all of it, but just enough so they would feel compelled to do what she wanted. Perhaps all of the experiences in the War, or more specifically, since Sonic and his group arrived, had changed Rin enough to consider a new path to walk. He certainly wished he had changed his path when he was alive.

"So, are they gonna let us go?" Sonic asked, "It'd be nice to leave one of these army strongholds through the door instead of the fire escape."

"Right now, it seems like they're not going to hold Rin, Saber and Shirou any longer," Archer said, "But the real question whether or not they'll do the same for you."

Sonic sighed, and hopped off the chair. He began to do stretches. "Here we go, another daring escape from the Few, The Proud and so on."

"I know the feeling." *Never mind that I didn't actually get away...* Archer sighed, "Well, let's see if Rin can convince them otherwise."

"Maybe I should pop back to my cell," Sonic considered, "You know, just so the guys camped outside that bathroom can go back to their regular posts."

At one point, Sonic lead the security force trying to track him down towards one of the rest rooms, opened and slammed the door before running away. Because he was moving so fast, the agents following him missed his exit and began to gather outside the rest room door, intent on catching Sonic, unaware that he had already left.

"I'm not sure that would be a good idea," Archer replied, "They might do something drastic to- What's that?"

"That" was a klaxon going off. Following that, a voice appeared on the PA system, saying, "Alert! Alert! This is a Level 5 emergency! Code Red!"

Sonic looked to Archer for an explanation, but the Servant was already gone.

Agent Stuart observed the conversation between the three youths and Satou through a security camera. Every now and then, he would suggest a question to ask through Satou's earpiece. He was so fixated on them that he almost didn't notice Twice enter.

" So, if Eggman doesn't know about your 'Grail', why has his automated weapons been found near the areas where these battles have happened? "

" We think Eggman's technology can detect the energy used for Magecraft, just as certain sensors could be used to detect radiation levels. It's more than likely he's just investigating and trying to determine the facts. "

"Not a bad hypothesis," Dr. Pierceman remarked, taking an unused chair. "I was considering something like that myself."

Stuart didn't respond. His mind was still trying to come to grips with what he was learning. Magic...of all possible explanations, he had not even considered that when investigating Fuyuki's mysterious crimes. While he suspected that there may be larger group operating, he hadn't expected actual sorcery. The investigation had unofficially gone to "Beyond my pay scale" levels of absurdity. 'Unofficial' in that Stuart had no idea how to put that in his formal report. He had a feeling if he did, he'd be lucky to be fired. If there really was this massive force operating, Stuart had a feeling that if he spoke to freely about what he knew, he might find himself encountering it in a less-than-civil manner.

"When we examined Rin for injuries, we didn't find any signs of her being different from any other person," Twice went on, "No signs of mutations, no abnormalities in her system- aside from the injuries from her fending off Kotomine, that is -nothing to indicate that she's more than what she appears to be. Perhaps we can convince the three of them to take part of a more thorough examination before releasing them."

There was an unsettling eagerness in Twice's voice that Stuart thankfully picked up on. Being allowed to tinker with Eggman's leftover was bringing out Pierceman's "Inner Mad Scientist" to the forefront. The problem with being black ops was that even the most disciplined member would be tempted misuse the freedom that came with the lack of oversight.

"Let's hold off on that for now," Stuart said, grinning at Twice's disappointed expression. "We'll continue surveillance on them for now. We don't have any real legal right to hold them. And if it was an assassin from this Association that offed Kotomine, we'll have better luck-"

"Agent Stuart! Dr. Pierceman!"

Their conversation was interrupted by a soldier running in. Judging from how harried he looked, he may have been among those trying to keep Sonic wrangled.

"Did you guys get Sonic under control?" Twice asked.

"No, it's not that! You have to evacuate!" The soldier reported, "We're under attack! Eggman's found us!"

" *What?!* "

The robot approaching get the Unused Building was easily the most human-looking unit sent out by Eggman to date. If not for the fact that it stood at a whopping fifteen feet, it could have passed for a

man wearing highly-advanced robotic armor. Although a bit on the top heavy side, the robots legs were as thick as phone poles, with the arms being the same. Instead of hands or even claws, the wrists were topped with large spheres. The head looked like a helmet that allowed no features to show, save for the half-circle lights where the eyes should be, angled into an ominous glare. Around the shoulders were pink fuzzy pads, with a third tip of fuzz on the back of the head, like an artificial top knot.

E-3382 : *Sir Fuzzy-Logik*

Of course, by the time it reached the hideout, a military force was already prepared to intercept. Tanks rolled out down the streets, military choppers armed with launchers hovered around and about, ready to engage when given the word. Sir Ffuzzy-Logic quickly glanced at all of the combat vehicles that now surrounded him. Because his face wasn't designed to express emotions, there was no way to tell what he thought of the hardware that opposed him. Of course, it was possible he didn't think anything of it. Eggman's robots weren't known for being deep thinkers. Or even shallow thinkers.

"Huh?" Shinji glanced down at Orbot and Cubot, "What's wrong with you two?"

For both robots, their eyes had twisted to emulate expressions of sorrow. Their hands dragged on the ground as they floated next to Shinji.

"I don't know..." Orbot admitted, "But for some reason I feel very depressed."

"Yeah," Cubot sighed, "Like we've been insulted but can't think up a retort..."

An opening appeared on Sir Ffuzzy-Logik's right ball. Through a series of unfolding mechanisms, a trident came out in a way that

made it look like the robot was gripping it in one 'hand'. When the tanks fired at Sr. Ffuzzy-Logik, the robot spun his trident around, deflecting the shells. The choppers fired their missiles, but Sir Ffuzzy-Logik leapt aside and dodged them. The missiles destroyed a good portion of the street, but the robot was unharmed. Sir Ffuzzy-Logik pointed his left ball at one of the choppers. An opening appeared, out shot an arrow made entirely of steel. It struck just under the rotor of the chopper, causing a jam and sending the craft plummeting to the ground. Something red zipped by and the chopper crashed onto the ground, exploding shortly thereafter. In a nearby alley, Archer gently laid the pilot down on the ground. He was unconscious (The pilot), having been knocked out by Archer during the rescue. Once he was done, Archer faded back into astral form.

Meanwhile, Sir Ffuzzy-Logik was on the move. He was moving very fast, and towards one of the nearest tanks. He jammed his trident into the tank's treads, and with a swing, flipped the tank over. The other tanks and choppers fired at the robot, but Sir Ffuzzy-Logik whirled about, once more deflecting their shots with his trident. As he was whirling, something shot out from the Abandoned Building, jumped off of the flipped tank, went directly over Sr. Ffuzzy-Logik before plummeting directly down and slamming onto the robot's head.

CLANG!

Sir Ffuzzy-Logik stopped whirling his trident about and tried to steady his shaking noggin as Sonic hopped down and faced his adversary. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Archer shimmer into and out of physical existence on a rooftop, conveniently in the military's blindspot.

Sir Ffuzzy-Logik saw Sonic's attention wander however minutely, and rushed at the Hedgehog, bringing his trident to bear. The robot stabbed at the spot where Sonic was standing, narrowly missing as Sonic zipped at him and darted around his legs. Once he was on the other side, Sonic leapt up to do a Homing Shot at Sir Ffuzzy-Logik. But before he could connect, Ffuzzy-Logik pivoted and brought up

his trident to block the attack. Sonic bounced off and landed back on the street. He wasn't even down for a second before Sir Ffuzz-Logik fired an at him. Sonic ducked, and the steel shot struck an old mailbox, impaling it.

Sonic rubbed the space under his nose. "Looks like this is gonna be a bit harder than usual. Nice!"

Sir Ffuzzy-Logik lunged, but instead of dodging, Sonic ran straight at the trident, running along the handle and up the robot's arm. He then struck Sir Ffuzzy-Logik with a Homing Shot, causing the robot to stumble.

"Not that I'm gonna make it easy for *you* ." Sonic smirked as he landed.

While this was going on, Satou was leading the Masters and Saber down a hallway. All around them other agents and workers were busy hurrying out as fast as they can. The intercom blared evacuation orders, complete with the requisite "This is not a drill!" Shirou carried Rin (Who was still recovering) on his back while Saber jogged by his side. The blond Servant could have easily outrun everyone else, but she would never have left Shirou's side unless there was clear and present danger. She would have carried Rin herself, but wanted to be ready in case they encountered a new enemy and she needed to fight.

"So, it's Eggman?" Shirou asked Satou.

Satou nodded absent-mindedly. He was listening to someone on his ear piece. He then said, "It's one of his robots. The military has it pinned down, but not without casualties. Hold on..." He paused, then grimaced, "Looks like your friend Sonic is fighting it now."

"What about Eggman himself?" Saber asked, "Is he here?"

Satou shook his head. "No. But he's sent these weapons alone into the city before."

"Let's just leave it to Sonic," Rin said, "They all came from the same world, and he enjoys fighting those things," She paused briefly to rub her head against Shirou's shoulder. Once she was done, she said, "Or do you want our help?"

"Our mission leaders would rather you didn't," Satou said, "Your Mage's Association would just tamper with our records, and that's the last thing this investigation needs. More to the point, you're still recovering. Just focus on getting better."

"Who *is* the head of this investigation?" Saber asked.

"That's classified." Satou said briskly.

Of course it was. But Saber only asked her question as a feint. She already knew who Satou was speaking with through his earpiece. She recognized the voice from the first day she set foot in Shirou's school.

So Mr. Stuart was a government agent... Saber thought, but choose to keep that a secret. For now...

Sonic ran circles around Sir Ffuzzy-Logik, creating a minor cyclone with his speed. However, the robot's body was far too heavy to be moved by the winds. At best, Sonic's maneuver threw Sir Ffuzzy-Logik off balance, giving the Hedgehog the opening to launch a Homing Shot at its head. However, the minute Sonic stopped circling to attack, Sir Ffuzzy-Logik recovered enough to block his attack.

Sonic landed back on the ground and considered his options. *That thing's reactions are good enough to keep up with me...I guess the best time to hit is when it's trying to stab me with that oversized tuning fork!*

Sir Ffuzzy-Logik fired a volley of arrows, which Sonic rolled around to avoid. He sped up in speed, and flipped up onto his feet, landing on the wreckage of the helicopter. He then turned about and smacked his rear to taunt Sir Ffuzzy-Logik. Rather than lunge at Sonic again, Sir Ffuzzy-Logik took another shot with his arrow, wrecking the chopper further when Sonic dodged.

Meanwhile, the remaining tanks and chopper awkwardly tried to keep up with the action, looking for an opening to attack. Unfortunately, Sonic was moving around so quickly that he kept confusing their scopes, leaving the pilots feeling both impotent and and dizzy. One tank managed to get behind Sir Ffuzzy-Logik and fired. As the shell flew towards the robot's back, Sir Ffuzzy-Logik spun on one heel to swing back and repel it with a roundhouse kick. The shell blasted a nearby building. Sonic took advantage of the robot's distraction by hitting him with a Homing Shot. Refocusing on Sonic, Sir Ffuzzy-Logik ran after the Hedgehog, its massive footsteps causing the ground the quake slightly. Being faster, Sonic easily out-spued his pursuer, running up a building and kicking off to leap over Sir Ffuzzy-Logik's head. The robot fired another arrow at Sonic, but missed. It almost looked like the shot was going to hit the other helicopter, but before it could connect, a *second* arrow countered it!

Archer quickly reentered astral form. That was close. while Sonic easily dodge whatever the robot attacked with, the military vehicles trying to 'contain' the battle were sitting (Or hovering, in the chopper's case) ducks. And there was no way to know how many arrows that robot was packing. Luckily, Archer was far away enough that it was unlikely that anyone would spot him providing covering fire. Still, it was probably wise to move to a different position, just in case...

Sonic ducked and slide underneath Sir Ffuzz-Logik as the robot tried to pulverize him with another roundhouse kick. Leaping from knee to

elbow to shoulder, Sonic hit the head with another Homing Shot. After he connected, Sonic landed back on the ground and zipped away from the robot to avoid a counter. He was right to do so, as the instant Sir Ffuzzy-Logik recovered he swung his trident at where Sonic had been mere moments ago. As he did, the remaining chopper swiveled to remain in the robot's blindspot.

" This is TR-57. I have the bogey in position. I'm preparing to to open fire. "

" Negative, do not engage, I repeat, do NOT engage. Just focus on keeping the enemy contained. Standby in case situation changes."

This sort of back and forth kept happening as Sonic and Sir Ffuzzy-Logik fought. Occasionally, the giant robot would try to attack one of the military vehicles, but Archer would intercept with his own shots.

I must be getting soft, saving a bunch of nameless strangers...
Archer thought, *Maybe I should get a helmet of my own in case I get spotted...*

Meanwhile, Sir Ffuzzy-Logik had begun a new tactic. Squatting down, the robot then pushed off the ground and blasted off into the air with a piston-powered jump. Sonic looked up into the sky and tried to see what was happening. The glare from the sun made it hard to get a good look at the dot in the blue.

A dot that was getting bigger.

No, not bigger. Closer.

Sonic waited. He tapped his foot, and then checked his watch. As he did, a shadow cast from above appeared over him, getting bigger by the milisecond. Once the radius of the shadow was about several feet wide, Sonic used a Spin Dash to zip away. A second later Sir Ffuzzy-Logik landed back on the ground, slamming his trident down so hard the tips went several feet beneath the asphalt. While he missed Sonic, the impact created a shockwave that knocked Sonic

off of his feet, and the Hedgehog fell into a tumble that left him on his head against a wall. Sir Ffuzzy-Logik ripped his trident out, taking a chunk of the street with it. He kicked the piece of asphalt at Sonic, but before it hit, Sonic had already rolled out of the way. He flipped up on his feet and jumped on top of a street sign. Sir Ffuzzy-Logik fired arrows at the Hedgehog, but Sonic, without losing his place at the top, ducked, weaved, and avoided the arrows. The robot once more jumped high into the air. When Sir Ffuzzy-Logik came down, Sonic was already well away from attack. But when Sir Ffuzzy-Logik hit the ground, Sonic jumped to avoid being knocked by the tremor, and followed up with a Homing Shot.

Sir Ffuzzy-Logik's head shook, and kept shaking. Soon, his entire body began to shake. The robot started spin around, sending out arrows that flew in random directions. Some struck the tanks and one winged the chopper. Sonic found himself forced back by both the arrows and the winds being generated.

Crud! It's moving around so much that I can't get a clean shot at it! Sonic thought as he darted around.

Before this could go on any longer, a bolt of light shot down and blasted off the head off of Sir Ffuzzy-Logik's trident, causing the robot to stop in shock. This was followed by a second shot, one that blasted Sir Ffuzzy-Logik's head right off of its shoulders. Sonic, righting himself, looked from the shot had come from. Standing on the rooftops, his longcoat waving heroically in the wind, was none other than Archer.

Who was wearing a Kamen Rider helmet.

I probably look really stupid, but... Archer saw Sonic flashing him a thumbs' up. *I guess this sense of fulfillment sorta makes up for it.*

In the Egg Saucer's main control room, one of the computer terminals had been displaying Sir Ffuzzy-Logik's status. His ammo count, fuel levels, damage accumulation, shown for all to see. That

was until the screen turned to static, followed by a screen that looked like a 1950s television test pattern only with Eggman's head in place of the Native American chief.

"That's another sub-boss down." Orbot noted.

Behind him, Cubot drew a line over a collage of the sub-bosses Eggman had built for his latest venture. Only one picture was left. Shinji watched a different screen, one that showed Eggman leading Gilgamesh down a corridor in his lab.

"It was once stated that anything that can be imagined can exist," Eggman said, "Or something. With the infinite possibilities of the multiverse, one can find whatever they want somewhere, *anywhere*."

"But why should we take the trouble of finding one of those worlds, when we can just as easily bring it here?"

Eggman brought Gilgamesh to a table. On top of the table was a fern in a flower pot. Above the potted fern, attached to the ceiling, was some sort of laser cannon, pointed directly down. Around the barrel were seven prongs, curved around so that they pointed at the laser's center. Eggman began to type onto a nearby terminal.

"My latest invention is a combination omniversal scope, analyzer, and molecular re-arranger," Eggman continued, "It scans the dimensions for whatever asked of it, analyzes its properties, and when it fires, transforms a target by breaking down and reassembling its atoms to match that of the scanned object."

As he spoke, the cannon's lights began to go on, and the barrel glowed. An ominous hum filled the air. Eggman handed Gilgamesh a pair of goggles and flipped his own over his glasses. The cannon fired, and when it struck the fern a bright light filled the air. Once the light faded, where once was a perfectly healthy plant was a model of a garish, Eggman-themed city. It looked like a miniature Las Vegas

combined with an amusement park's roller coasters. A bright, neon sign was displayed, reading "EGGMAN LAND!".

Eggman declared, "I call it the Genesis Ray!"

"Impressive," Gilgamesh said, removing the goggles. He was more interested in the method than the result. "Can your invention affect a larger area?"

"Of course!" Eggman boasted proudly, but then said awkwardly, "Er, Once the necessary power requirements have been met, of course. With all seven Chaos Emeralds, my Genesis Ray can transmogrify an entire planet. Of course, that pest Sonic and his friends have been...interfering with with Emerald acquisition."

"Which is why you've been trying to claim my Holy Grail," Gilgamesh chuckled, "Incredible! I was just planning on unleashing the Grail's power to purge this rotten, crude world and rule only those who could weather the storm, but this..." He waved at the Genesis Ray, "This is even better! With this machine, I can upgrade this primitive realm into something more deserving of my splendor. You have done well, Doctor."

Eggman forced a smile. He wasn't particularly happy with Gilgamesh essentially shoehorning himself into the Genesis Ray plan, but from what Orbot's scans had discovered, it was a headache he could deal with.

"So *glad* to be of service." Eggman purred as he and Gilgamesh shook hands.

TO BE CONTINUED

Tiger Dojo

Taiga: Atten-hut! All troops fall in! The Tiger Dojo has begun, with your instructor, Fujimura Taiga!

Illya: And don't forget about your Number One Student, Illya- *chan*!

Taiga: We're finally here! After so long, the final arc has begun; "*Farewell, Genesis!*"

Illya: So Eggman went for the team-up after all...not that Goldy would let him otherwise. I think Gilgamesh could operate Eggman's weapons all on his own, but just enjoys making that goofy old man bow to him. That guy is such a jerk!

Taiga: No doubts about that. But, enough about those baddies, let's get this Q/A going!

Illya: Our first question comes from godzillahero3, who asks, "Are you ever going to introduce Mordred into your story?" Fuuu! Why do we need that clone of Saber? The real Saber gets too much attention as it is!

Taiga: I doubt the author is skilled enough to shoehorn Mordred into *Fate / Genesis* at this time...but I'm sure Mor- *chan* would appreciate you mentioning her!

Illya: The author's only a passive fan of the Fate series, anyway... Only read *Zero* and watched the first anime series!

Taiga: Next is, "what Barthomeloi Lorelei thinks about this situation?" from Mr. STAIN. Huh? Who's that?

Illya: Barthomeloi Lorelei is an aristocratic mage that was mentioned in a supplementary book for *Tsukihime*. She doesn't have much presence in any of the main series, but she was featured in the Prelude I short story. She's annoyed by the Fuyuki mages for letting Sonic, but is too distracted by the Dead Apostles to really do anything about. Apparently, the Chaos Control from when Sonic's group appeared awoke something horrible in South Africa, and she's taking care of that!

Taiga: Wow! That's convenient! And now, our last question, from superpierce, "I'm assuming that when Kirei was saying the Grail was a creation of god he was just saying that to seem like he was a devote even though he knew the grail wasn't a divine construct?" I think he was just trying to screw with Sonic. Some villains like to pretend their evil deeds are justified if it is in the name of God.

Illya: Sonic wasn't fooled, though! I don't think he's faced any religious villains, but when you've befriended the incarnation of your planet's positive life-force, it's hard to be intimidated by those claiming to be doing the Lord's work.

Taiga: And that is all the time we have left. But before we go, I have an announcement; Chapter 8, "Leave That Sword For Now" was featured in "Fate Cinema Order" D.N. Works. Please read it and leave a review!

Illya: Guh...! That was the chapter I lost Berserker, why couldn't they have watched something cooler, like when he destroyed that Eggman robot...?

Taiga: We will see you at the next practice! Goodbye, everyone!

Rabble-Rousers

Chapter 26: Rabble-Rousers

Once he learned from Archer that Team Saber and Rin were going to be released from government custody, (Thanks, convenient telepathic connection!), Sonic decided that he had imposed on the military's kindness for too long and chose to vacate the premises as quickly as he could. The remaining military chopper tried to keep up, but it gave up after Sonic reached a velocity normally attributed to a meteor entering Earth's atmosphere.

When he reached Illya's Castle, Sonic learned that Knuckles had found the second-to-last Chaos Emerald. And Sonic, in turn, told them of what Shirou had done.

"Whoa...talk about a game-changer..." Tails breathed.

Knuckles nodded. "Makes sense, though. It's getting really hard for them to hide magic lately. I guess an actual government conspiracy is the next logical step."

"When do you think they're going to talk to the Mage's Associate to figure things out?" Amy asked, "I mean, the MA is the one who normally deals with that."

Sonic, Tails, and Knuckles were silent for a moment. That bothered Amy. She had this unnerving feeling that there was this inside joke going on...and it wasn't funny in the slightest.

"Uh, Amy, what do you know about the Mage's Association?" Tails asked diplomatically.

Amy crossed her arms in thought. "Well, Bazett told me that they're the ones that hide magic and wizards from the rest of the world...so I guess it's kinda like *Harry Potter* ."

Knuckles whistled. "Hoo, boy."

Sonic rubbed the back of his head. He suddenly felt like that parent who had to explain to their child that the really old relative that went to the hospital *wasn't* going to get better and come back in time for Christmas.

"Did...Bazett...mention *how* the MA keeps things under wraps?" Sonic asked at last. He already knew the answer.

"No..." Amy uncrossed her arms and looked down. "What exactly am I missing?"

They told her. She gasped.

"No way..." She whispered, "The entire village?"

"That's what Shirou said his dad told him," Sonic said, "And after hearing about what happened to Sakura, it probably wasn't the first time."

"That's why everyone's been so worried about keeping things quiet," Tails went on, "There's no telling what might happen if someone from the Association gets involved."

"...Bazett works for the Association..." Amy said at last.

Sonic tapped his foot. He never got the chance to really talk to the older woman, so he had no way real way to know what kind of person she was like. But he also didn't like how downcast Amy was getting. While her clinging tendencies worked his nerves sometimes, she was still a good and valued friend, and he didn't want her to lose hope for another friend.

Putting on a confident smile, Sonic said, "Well, maybe she's one of the good ones. Y'know, a white sheep. If she wasn't, she'd have already started trouble right now, right?"

That seemed to cheer Amy up, and the pink Hedgehog smiled.
"Yeah, I guess you're right."

It was at that moment that a fifth voice spoke up. "Damn right he is."

Team Sonic jumped as Lancer materialized into being. Sonic and Knuckles quickly got in front of Tails and Amy, their fur standing on end. While they learned from Amy that Lancer was only being forced to kill by Kotomine, that didn't mean they were going to like or be at ease around the Servant. Especially since said Servant didn't seem remotely apologetic about his past deeds.

Lancer held up his hands placatingly. "I'm not here to cause trouble. Just relax."

"Yeah, we're not gonna do that." Tails said, starting to hover off the floor.

"Look, whatever problems that were between us were because of Kirei," Lancer explained, rubbing the back of his head. "With him dead, you don't gotta worry about any problems from me."

"Yeah, but what about the people you've killed?" Sonic asked.

Lancer shrugged. "Not something I'm proud of, but Kirei had me kill them because he couldn't supply me with Mana. That's all there was to it."

"Not exactly helping your case, bub." Knuckles pointed out.

"They've got a point, Lancer," Amy said, "All of those poor people probably had families who miss them."

Lancer sighed. He normally wouldn't have cared, but he also knew that Amy had helped Bazett out and even saved her life. He was under strict (Though not Command Seal-enforced) orders to make nice with Amy's group until further notice. "Fine. But what do you want me to do? You can't send me to jail because I'm a Servant, and

Magecraft is supposed to be hidden. Want me to make an apology video to post online?"

Team Sonic got into a huddle. They spoke in low tones, and at times, over each other. It was hard for Lancer to make out what they were saying. Everyone now and then one of the four would glance at Lancer, either to make sure he wasn't going to attack or to better plan. Eventually, they came apart and faced Lancer.

"Well?" The spearman asked.

In a second, the four outsiders gang-rushed Lancer. Sonic zipped around to his back while Tails, Knuckles, and Amy grabbed hold of his legs. The Hound was too confused by these actions to really fight back. His confusion increased and evolved into agitation when he felt Sonic pull at the waistband of his blue bodysuit.

"Hey! Hey! Hey! What are you doing back there!?" Lancer cried out.

Instead of answering, Sonic, still holding onto the waistband, took off for the door. The waistband stretched, getting longer and longer as Sonic went further and further. Being made of pure Prana itself, the waistband did not break. Its supernatural elasticity adjusted for whatever distance Sonic ran, refusing to give even a hint of fraying.

Hisui was cleaning the windows on the ground level of the Tohno Mansion's grounds. After scrubbing away all of the dirt, stains, and smudge marks, she began to gently wipe away the water with a dry rag. Just as she was finished, she heard a noise like a one-man stampede approaching. Turning around with only a squeegee to defend herself, Hisui's train of thought stalled when she saw some sort of spikey-headed blue creature in red and white sneakers coming up to her. In his hand was what looked like an elastic waistband that stretched out from the horizon.

Giving the maid a smile and nod, Sonic let go of the band. No longer bound by Sonic's grip, the elastic worked to resume its proper size at

the speed of a bullet. Sonic put a hand to an ear. A minute later, an ear-splitting shriek caused the birds in the trees to fly away. Sonic laughed, and sped off from whence he came.

Hisui stared in confusion. The window she had just cleaned opened up.

"Huh? Hisui, did you hear something?" Tohno Shiki asked.

"Shirou, why are you smiling?" Saber asked her Master.

"I'm...not sure," Shirou replied, unable to fight the grin that inexplicably took over his expression. "But I just feel really happy right now."

That's funny. So do I. Archer thought. It was a good thing he was in astral form then. The last thing he wanted was for Rin to point how *similar* their goofy smirks probably looked.

The four of them had just returned to the Emiya property, dropped off by a police officer that was Most Definitely Not A Secret Agent In Disguise. Said "officer" was speaking to Taiga about what had happened at the Fuyuki Church...or at least, what Officially had happened. The story that the Masters and the agents had agreed on was that Kirei had tried to kill Rin, but another church-goer had killed him in defense of the teenager. Shirou and Saber, who were just passing by, showed up and called the police. Of course, while the adults were talking, Rin told Sakura and Illya the little details that had been left out. Sakura was horrified that the priest, supposedly an impartial party in the War, but also a friend of their family, had been working against them for years. While she held no love for the father that gave her to Zouken, she felt pity for Rin when her sister mournfully related what she learned, from Kirei's mouth no less. She imagined that she would have felt the same way if it had been Uncle Kariya.

When Taiga finished speaking with the officer, she came to the living room and pulled Rin into a hug, clearly intending on trying to comfort her student.

"I can't believe something like that happened to you..." The teacher said with uncharacteristic seriousness, "First Sakura's house blowing up, now this...the past week has been awful, hasn't it?"

Rin returned the hug. "Thank you, sensei..." And she meant it.

Taiga sighed. "It's hard to imagine that the father of the church was behind all of the mysterious killings...but I guess you can't trust the quiet ones, huh?"

"Have you ever spoken to Kotomine, Fuji- *nee* ?" Shirou asked.

Still holding onto Rin, Taiga said, "No, but I've heard about him from other people," A frowned crossed her face. "For some reason, every time I heard his name, I would get the oddest feeling of danger."

Great, Rin thought unhappily, So even the Tiger picked up on it...

"Well, I don't blame you for being fooled by him," Taiga said, "Considering he was your guardian for the past decade, there was no reason you would suspect he had been up to trouble."

That helped dull the sting of humiliation...just a little. Taiga separated from Rin and gave her an encouraging smile.

"You can stay here for tonight," Taiga said, and to Shirou she ordered, "Be sure to give her double portions at dinner tonight!"

"I will, Fuji- *nee* ." Shirou replied. He had already in fact been planning to sneak Rin some extra as recompense for revealing Magecraft, but it was nice to have Taiga's open endorsement of the idea. She normally became irritable when someone else got more portions than her.

"I need to go talk with grandpa," Taiga said, "Illya- *chan* , you said you wanted to stay here in Japan with Shirou, right?"

"That's right," Illya said, " *Onii-chan* invited me to stay with him, and that's what I'm going to do."

"Well, if anyone has the pull to convince the rest of your family to let it happen, it's definitely the Fujimura Group!" Taiga proclaimed, "Once I explain how badly they've treated you, Grandpa will pull out all the stops."

The only reason the Einzberns didn't come for Illya was because they she failed to become the Grail, Archer thought, thinking on events in his own timeline. And in any case, I imagine Taiga will be regretting this decision days down the road...

After Taiga left, Shirou went to work in the kitchen. While it was still too early for dinner, he could still whip up some snacks. He could hear the sound of the Sega Genesis being turned on, (" SAY-GAAAH! ") signaling another gaming match between Saber and Illya. He could also faintly hear Rin and Sakura chatting. He still couldn't believe that they were sisters...

Shirou felt a presence behind him. He could also sense a pair of eyes bore into his back. There was no guess who *that* was. "Do you think I did the right thing, Archer?"

Archer didn't answer, at first. Instead, he entered the kitchen and leaned back against the counter. The Servant of Rin looked up at the ceiling. Shirou briefly glanced at white-haired man, wondering what he was thinking. The bowman had a far-off look in his eyes.

"Once...there was a man who decided that the best way to help people was through sacrifice," Archer said at last, "He felt that since it was impossible to save everyone, he would save the most at the cost of a few."

Shirou knew of that philosophy. From what Saber had described, his own father had lived by that coda himself, up until the Fire of Fuyuki.

"If killing a few, or letting them die, would protect the lives of the majority, than that would be necessary price to pay for world peace," Archer continued, "And since *he* wasn't paying that price, he could make that decision again, and again.

"But in his pursuit of peace, he didn't realize the problem with that method until it was too late. While it was true that he could save some people, in time, he ended up killing more people than he saved," Archer closed his eyes and frowned, "It was a logical fallacy that only a selfish fool would fall into."

"Is that how you became a Heroic Spirit?" Shirou asked, getting back to his chopping. He decided to whip up some apple slices, and make some tea.

"Mind your own business," Archer replied, "And as for your question, do you know what would have happened if you hadn't scared those agents with your Magecraft and talk of the Clock Tower?"

"Rin and I would have been arrested." Shirou answered.

"And possibly killed by the Mage's Association," Archer stated, "Along with that entire agency. But those deaths would have been a paltry sum compared to the chaos that would have ensued if Magecraft was publicly revealed. Instead of making a sacrifice for the greater good, you chose to selfishly preserve a few inconsequential people."

"...I think I'm okay with this kind of selfishness," Shirou retorted at last, "Especially since you said killing a few to save the most was pointless."

"This kind of selfishness is better for you," Archer replied, "No doubt the world is full of so-called 'noble' warriors who thought preserving countless souls they'd never meet at the cost of those in front of

them was appropriate, only to find themselves facing a Hell that never ends..."

There's no doubt about it, he's definitely talking about himself, Shirou thought as he finished his work. He wondered what kind of life Archer had led. He would ask Rin about it when she was feeling a little better. No doubt she had probably figured it out from dreaming about his past. "So I guess I did the right thing."

"Sure, let's go with that." Archer said. He was thinking about his own death. Imprisoned by those who assumed he had provoked the disaster he set out to save people from, all because there was no way to comprehend how he did it without explaining Magecraft. He kept his mouth shut to preserve the secrecy. Now he wondered just whether he could have gotten off with a simple display...

The philosophical discussion was cut off by a knock at the door. Putting out the slices and tea, Shirou excused himself and went to see who it was. Taiga couldn't have returned so quickly, and she wouldn't have knocked; His Fuji -nee would have just barged in without warning. Could the government have sent a messenger? Maybe it was Bazett. She and Lancer disappeared after the battle with Kotomine.

But when Shirou opened the door, he found that it was neither of them. It was Shinji.

"Yo, Emiya." His estranged classmate and Sakura's older brother greeted tiredly.

"Shinji..." Shirou felt his brain stall. He hadn't even thought about the Matou teen since the battle at the harbor. "What are you doing here?"

Shinji shrugged. "Just thought I'd pop in for a visit. Maybe get some sympathy, you know? Or didn't you hear that my *house blew up*?" That last part sounded incredibly, understandably, bitter.

Of course, I'd be upset too if my home became a smoking crater, Shirou thought as he let Shinji inside, *I probably shouldn't tell him that it was Sonic and I that did it.*

"What are you going to do now?" Shirou asked.

"Luckily, the family bank accounts are still valid, they money practically makes itself," Shinji huffed, "I'm still staying at a hotel until something more permanent can be arranged."

Shirou briefly toyed with the idea of inviting Shinji to stay at the Emiya Property until better living arrangements were made, but changed his mind. Shinji was still a Master, as far as he knew. And while Saber had accepted Illya staying on the Estate, with Rin visiting while they were in an alliance to fight Eggman, Shinji might not be so welcome. And truth be told, Shirou didn't really want Shinji as a long-term resident either...

As they entered the living room, Shinji gave the assembled ladies there a once-over. His gaze briefly stopped on Sakura, before he turned to give Shirou an expression that was a cross between a grimace and smirk.

"Aren't you lucky, Emiya, all these ladies here," Shinji muttered, "It's like something out of a harem..."

Shinji stopped. He looked back into the living room. Shirou saw that his eyes were now fixated on the white-haired child playing Genesis games with Saber. He turned to Shirou, mouth opened to speak, but no noise came out. Shinji looked back at Illya, and then at Shirou, still trying to speak. Finally, he took Shirou's shoulder and pulled him back into the hallway.

"E-Emiya..." Shinji stammered, "Isn't that the Master of Berserker? Why is she inside your house!? Don't tell me you forged an alliance with her *and* Tohsaka?"

Ah, that's right. Shinji's been on his own for a while, so he doesn't know that Berserker was defeated, Shirou thought, and said, "It's all right, Shinji. Illya doesn't have a Servant anymore. She's not part of the Holy War, now."

Shinji's jaw dropped and he stared at Shirou. "Whaaa...?"

While Shirou explained to Shinji about what had happened in the recent battles, the ladies in the living room had their own talk. Shinji's brief intrusion had not gone unnoticed, and the girls were curious about his intentions.

"*Nii-san...*" Sakura murmured, looking very worried. She remembered the video Shinji showed her at the cafe. He had threatened to show Shirou if she didn't give her brother a Servant. Was he going to make good on that dire oath...?

Rin saw Sakura's fear, and her eyes narrowed. While she knew that her little sister's time in the Matou household was fraught with torment administered by that old pile of worms, she wondered if Shinji might have had a part in it.

"Don't worry, Sakura," Rin said firmly, "If that little creep causes trouble, I'll be sure to toss him out. This may be Emiya's home, but he's my student. As his teacher, I won't permit him to accept any of Shinji's...Shinji-ness."

"N... *Nee-san...*" Sakura looked to her older sister.

"It's not like that guy can do anything, anyway," Illya piped up, "After all, the Matous are a clan of declining Mages. Or..." She smirked, "They *were* a declining clan. With that sour old man dead, it's just one powerless guy with seaweed hair."

"Jeez, what a bunch of mean-spirited words," Shinji declared as he entered the room, "What kind of harem did Emiya put together?"

Shinji had the biggest, most obnoxious smile plastered on his face. While this may have been an attempt to appear friendly and endearing, there was a twitch under his left eye that made him look more like a potential serial killer about to go on a rampage. Behind him, Shirou just sighed. While Shinji seemed to no longer fear Illya, this blatant disrespect was not a step in the right direction.

Archer, meanwhile, recalled Illya telling him about how she killed Shinji not long after Rider was beaten. Given that Shinji had just tried to melt down the entire school and everyone in it with Rider's Blood Fort Andromeda, Archer hadn't given it much thought. Now though, he wondered what kind of life his Shinji could have lived if his Illya hadn't been so...thorough.

Shinji, however he wanted to play it cool, couldn't help but grin with anticipation. The little monster girl had lost her monster! And only he knew about it! He recalled what Gilgamesh had told Eggman before Shinji returned to Fuyuki...

"Wait, so we need more than that little albino to get the Holy Grail?" Eggman asked, perplexed.

Gilgamesh nodded, "That's right. Every Grail War, the Einzberns craft a homunculus to house the spirits of defeated Servants. A ridiculous little meat-puppet that pretends to be a person until they fulfill their purpose of obtaining all seven of the Servants. Those captured spirits, when their energy is combined, transform the puppet into the Holy Grail. However, that alone is not enough to cause the Grail to manifest. She would have to be in a region of power, where Fuyuki's leylines intersect."

"That would explain the girl's high energy output," Orbot commented, "She would need it in order to contain and control all that power."

"Gee, too bad we can't get her until that Stand of hers is beaten," Cubot remarked, "If only we had a Stand of our own..."

"It's not a Stand!" Eggman, Orbot, Shinji and Gilgamesh shouted.

Calming down, Gilgamesh said, "And don't insult me by considering her pet brute a threat. I have plenty of tools to kill it within my Gate of Babylon. All I need is a good opportunity to move without Saber or the rest of those mongrels interfering..."

Back in the present, Shinji reached out to give Illya a friendly pat on the head. "Well, whatever. Since we both lost our Servants, why don't we be friends, right?"

Illya glared at Shinji, and her body seemed to emit some sort of ominous light. Sweating, Shinji backed away. Once he did, the light faded.

"Only Shirou is allowed to touch me," Illya told Shinji firmly, before facing her brother. "*Onii-chan*, if you keep hanging around losers like this, it'll cause your dignity to diminish."

"Illya..." Shirou sighed. It looked like it would be a full-time job trying to keep the peace in this household.

Shinji's eye began to twitch again. He thought, *Have your yuks now, you little hellion...I'll enjoy putting you in the doc's power-drain machine. All I need to do is find a good opportunity to sneak away and call him... No, I shouldn't be hasty. If I leave now after going to all the trouble to fast-talk Emiya into letting me come, it might look suspicious. I'll play the fool for now...*

"Speaking of dignity, what does it say about yours when a member of the great and mighty Einzbern Mage Clan is spending her day playing old-school video games?" Shinji retorted not-so-good-naturedly, "Or what, is your clan that eager to win at something after failing to get the Holy Grail five times in a row?" He knew he scored a point when he saw Illya frown and puff up her cheeks. But when he saw Shirou frowning, he knew he'd have to make nice or be thrown out. "Well, the old man wasn't that much better, honestly. As old as

he was, he'd never gotten the Holy Grail either. After all, close only counts in horseshoes, right?"

At this point Shinji had gotten close to where Rin was sitting with Sakura. He gave her a playful nudge with his elbow. Needless to say, Rin's expression indicated that this act was *not* appreciated. However, out of respect for the fact that she was technically in Shirou's house, the Tohsaka Master chose not to say anything. Instead, she flashed Shinji a smile that, technically, would look more appropriate on a great white shark. Briefly, Archer rematerialized just long enough to warn the Matou boy that while Shinji's died for some reason, Rin still had *her* Servant.

The rest of the evening went about the same pattern. Shinji would make the occasional effort to be friendly, only to passive-aggressively rebutted by one of the girls. Shirou attempted to be the peacemaker, but in time Shinji just closed himself off into a self-contained metaphorical corner.

Dinnertime came, and so did Taiga. She was a bit surprised to see Shinji would be sticking around as well, but also happy that he would be spending time with his sister after her unfortunate episodes. Shinji, remember the last time he spent with his sister, suppressed his gag reflex.

(And Shirou realized that the family food budget was now going to be officially in the red. He wondered if it was too late to ask the government agents for a stipend in return for more intel on Mages.)

Strangely enough, Shinji only ate just enough to clear his plate once. (Strange, in that no one in their right mind would not take a second helping of Shirou's cooking.) Once he was finished, he excused himself and shuffled out as quickly as he could without running. Once he had left the house, Shinji had to resist the urge to break into a run. There was a chance that either Archer or Saber might have been watching him leave. He couldn't act unusual, or they would follow him in suspicion. Just before he was out of the neighborhood, a woman in a dark red suit passed by. She had a decent figure, so

Shinji briefly forgot all about Illya's lack of Servant and current location as he checked her out. He also forgot where to look where he was going, and walked into a street sign.

Once Taiga had left for the evening, and the dishes had been washed and dried, Archer revealed the identity of the Fourth War's Archer. It was shocking at first for the rest of the group to hear, but once they got past the initial outrage, they recognized that the mysterious Servant's power must surely have originated from one of mankind's oldest myths.

"But...if he's Gilgamesh, how can we beat him?" Shirou asked, "Does he have a weakness we can exploit?"

"The only one I can think of is his arrogance," Archer stated, "It's clear from the beginning that he could have wiped us all out without any effort. But he thinks he's so superior to us that he takes it easy. We can take advantage of that." *At least, I think that's how Saber beat him in my time...*

Meanwhile, Archer and Rin, mostly on Archer's request, were going to keep Archer's true identity a secret. The alliance had experienced all kinds of shocking reveals, but "Archer is Future-Shirou" would be the last straw. The last thing they needed was more confusion, and Archer *really* didn't want to answer any awkward questions like, "Can you remember who wins the next world series?"

("Okay! Okay! If you don't remember, just say so! What a grouch..." Rin had grumbled at the rather venomous reply she got from Archer.)

"Um..." Sakura paused a moment to think about her phrasing. She asked, "Doesn't a Servant's power depend on what kind of Master they have?"

Rin smiled brightly, "That's right! And as far as we know, Gilgamesh doesn't have a Master anymore. Without a mage to supply him with Mana, Gilgamesh would run out of life-force in a protracted battle."

"But what if Gilgamesh starts feeding on the townspeople like Lancer and Rider did?" Shirou asked worriedly, "There's no telling how many..." There was a knock at the door. "Hold on, I'll see who that is."

As Shirou left the living room, talk turned to how to locate Gilgamesh. The suggestion to use Tails' energy-radar to track the King of Heroes was considered, but Rin pointed out, "That thing isn't perfect. It couldn't even tell that a Chaos Emerald was right under Emiya's junk house until Taiga blasted a hole in the floor."

That's when Shirou came in, with Bazett McRemitz in tow. Bazett's expression was crestfallen. She had the look of a chef who had been ordered to cook their favorite goldfish on order of the king. Archer had seen that look before, as had Saber. In fact, Saber had bore that expression several times in her life as King, when having to a decision that was for the Good Of The Nation, but bad for That Unfortunate But Unimportant Village that didn't really *need* support from invading barbarians.

"What is it?" Shirou asked.

"The Mage's Association has alerted me," Bazett said, "They want us- the Tohsaka Clan Head and myself -to capture Amy and her friends before they expose themselves any further."

"Is it a Sealing Designation?" Rin asked sharply.

A Sealing Designation was the greatest "honor" The Mage's Association could ever bestow. Very much like *seppuku* , only without the sweet release of death. Those given Sealing Designations held abilities that the could not be replicated through study, and the Mage's Association would mobilize the greatest effort to capture them. If caught, the Designated would be indefinitely incarcerated, their bodies permanently preserved as samples of their power.

"No," Bazett said, "But if Rin and I can't pull it off, they *will* send more Enforcers- to say nothing how the Holy Church will react when they learn Kotomine is dead."

"That's a problem we can put off," Rin said determinedly, "Since we're no longer pursuing the Holy Grail, we can focus on helping those characters get back to their world."

Bazett blinked. "Not pursuing the Grail?"

And that led to Shirou explaining to Bazett what Zouken had revealed. The Irish mage was stunned at these revelations, but handled the truth better than they had hoped.

"So the Grail was cursed from the beginning..." Bazett sighed, "That would explain those corrupted Servants."

"So, are we in agreement?" Rin asked, "So far, you, Shirou and myself are the only Masters with active Servants. If we enter a non-aggression pact, we can put a pin in the Holy War problem."

"Will be that enough?" Shirou asked.

"If our Servants don't kill themselves, they can't feed their energy towards the Grail," Rin explained, "It's like they say, 'The best way to win a war is not to fight'."

As they talked, Saber's eyes drifted towards Illya. The little homunculus seemed bored with the proceedings, and was drumming her fingers on the table almost rhythmically. Saber knew, from what Irisviel had told her, just how doggedly the Einzberns had chased after the Holy Grail, how determined they were to obtain the Heaven's Feel. So obsessed that they turned her into a container for the Grail. Would the Einzbern Clan go as far as turning their own Master into a container as well? With each Servant that died, they would enter the body, and soon overwhelm its health with their energy-

No, this shouldn't be a problem, Saber told herself, As far as we know, only Rider, Caster, and Berserker were killed. Assassin escaped the destruction of the Matou house, but without a Master he should be dead from lack of Mana. It was late into the War that Irisviel's health began to decline. But she did have Avalon, didn't she...

"-ber?"

Shirou's voice broke Saber out of her thoughts. She started. "Oh! Yes, Shirou?" She looked abashed. "I-I'm sorry. I'm afraid I became lost in my thoughts and was not paying attention..."

I wonder what she was thinking about? It must have been pretty important if Saber, who is normally so attentive, would lose track of the conversation. Shirou thought, and said, "I asked you if it was all right that we no longer pursued the Grail."

"Yes, it is fine," Saber said, "I understand that the Holy Grail cannot grant any wish. And more to the point, I believe I have lost my motivation for seeking it as well," *I cannot change the past...and perhaps I shouldn't. Whatever role I was meant to play back then has ended. Now, for what little time is left in this world, I shall fight to create a better future...* She looked at Bazett. "However, can you guarantee that Lancer would agree to this? I find it hard to believe that Hound, who lives for battle, would let a conflict end this way."

Bazett crossed her arms and nodded. "I understand how you feel. While talking about his role as Kirei's Servant, the most frequent complaint was that Kirei never let him fight the other Servants. He's always been kept on a tight leash."

Shirou suddenly imagined Lancer as an actual dog, tied to a tree in someone's backyard. People would pass by the house, and Lancer would pointlessly run at them, barking. And whenever he reached the end of his rope, the tension would pull him back in the yard while the Hound whimpered in pain.

"Um, *senpai*? Why are you smiling?" Sakura asked.

"Er, no reason," Shirou lied.

"But he's not some thug," Bazett continued, "I'll explain to him how dangerous it would be if the Grail War continued. I think he's more interested in fighting a giant robot like the rest of us have."

"But what about the Mage's Association?" Shirou asked, "Will they really just idly wait for you and Tohsaka to present results?"

"Heh heh heh..." That ominous chuckling came from Rin, who now sported a devious smile on her face. She looked like a supervillain who had just conceived of a nefarious plot. That Cat-About-To-Eat-The-Canary-Smile sent a shiver down Shirou's spine.

"I think..." She paused for dramatic effect. "I have an idea for that problem."

THE NEXT DAY

Multiple rushes of wind caused by high-speed movement could be heard. The room shook from the impact of something hitting the walls and floor several times. Finally, Rin grunted, and made a noise that seemed to be a cross of pain and exhaustion.

Sonic happily bounced on his heels, an utterly devilish expression on his face. "Well, that was fun."

Rin growled, a bit too loudly. "Damn you... Even Archer was Beaten?"

"That was a close one," Sonic remarked, stretching. "But close only counts in Horseshoes."

But then Rin smirked, and snapped her fingers. The sound of jewels glowing and electricity sparking filled the air. Sonic gasped, and fell to his knees.

Rin chortled with wicked glee. "Ohohoho! While you were zipping around and showing off, I prepared one of the Tohsakah Clan's better spells to ensnare you. Now you're mine, and soon I'll know the secret of your powers!"

It was at that moment that Bazett charged into the room. Flipping through the air, she delivered an axe-kick that shook the floor, knocking a few ornaments off of the shelves.

"You fool!" Rin cursed, "Now he's loose!"

"Damn it!" Bazett cried, "That was supposed to knock him out!"

Sonic laughed. "Well, that was Fun! But I'm getting bored. I wonder if those guys in Clock Tower are up for a witch hunt?"

Sonic ran out of the room as fast as he could. It was the loudest exit he had ever done. Sonic went out of his way to stomp on the floor with each step, and made sure to slam the door as hard as he could. Rin cringed at the sound (So did Archer- fixing the hinges would be his job.), but said nothing. Archer materialized and calmly shut off the transmitter. Once he did, Rin and Bazett exhaled deeply.

"Okay, Sonic, you can come back in," Archer called out, "I turned it off."

Sonic strolled back into the living room. He had a bowl of fruit in hand. Taking a seat on the couch, he offered it to the girls while munching on a pear. Rin took and began to peel an orange. Bazett, however, tapped her foot impatiently.

"Why did I have to be the one to screw up?" She asked.

"Because *I* didn't want to be the one screw up," Rin replied matter-of-factly. "Anyway, you lost the draw."

We should have done Rock-Paper-Scissors, Bazett thought bitterly, I would have won for sure.

After learning that the Mage's Association was demanding Sonic's capture, the group had quickly put together a plan to buy time. Staging a battle that would be "accidentally" transmitted using the Tohsaka Clan's special communication tool, they would give the Mage's Association the impression that Sonic was on his way to attack them. With any luck, the Lords of Clock Tower would ignore Fuyuki just long enough for the final Chaos Emerald to be found. It was a risky plan, but since the Lords had a dim view of Japanese Mages to begin with, there was a good chance they would believe Rin failed in capturing Sonic. Rin, of course, refused to play the fool, so after some bantering and the drawing of straws it was decided that Bazett would "help out" but "inadvertently ruin" the capture of Sonic.

"So, what now?" Bazett asked, taking some grapes to eat.

Sonic shrugged. "Nothin' else to do, except get the last Emerald. Then me and buds can grab Eggman and get outta your hair."

Lancer materialized into the room. "I think I can help out with that."

"Oh? You want to be helpful?" Archer asked in that deadpan manner of his, "What paralell universe have I stumbled onto?"

"Get bent." Lancer retorted, before continuing. "So, is it true that Chaos Emeralds are typically found inside of those giant ring worlds?"

"Mostly," Amy said, coming in. She had been keeping watch while everyone else performed in the roleplay. "Sometimes they end up lying on the ground, like the one you found in Shirou's house. But a Special Zone's the best place to look. Why? Do you know where one is?"

Lancer smirked. "Yeah. I found one of these Special Zones not long after you guys came into our world. I've been popping in and out getting those energizing Rings so I wouldn't have to attack people. It

was the only place I could have my thoughts to myself without worrying about Kotomine listening in."

Rin gaped. "What? Why didn't you say so sooner! We could have just gone after it and sent Sonic's group back home by now!"

Lancer shrugged. "Eh, I was curious to see what kind of show you were going to do."

"Why, you-!"

Bazett sighed as Lancer continued to rib and tease Rin. But before she could reprimand Lancer, she saw Amy was now sitting on the couch, looking despondent. She then got up, and walked away.

"Amy?" The Enforcer asked, "Are you all right?"

Amy looked back, sighed, and continued out of the house. Concerned for her friend, Bazett followed her. This spared her the pain of listening to Rin dragging Archer into her argument with Lancer.

The two ladies ended up in the backyard. Amy looked at the trenches made by the *Tornado* when it had been hidden there.

"Bazett...is it true that the Mage's Association...have they killed people?" Amy finally asked.

Bazett shut her eyes. Of course. That's what was bothering her. For all her obsession with Sonic, Amy was still a kind-hearted soul, but finding out a friend was involved in bloodshed... "...Yes."

"Did...did you do any of that?"

"...Yes," Bazett would not insult her friend by lying. She continued, "For years, I too believed that the protection of Magecraft's secrecy was more important than the lives of those who simply knew too much. When Kotomine cut off my arm for Lancer's Command Seals,

I was frustrated that Kotomine had tricked me, but there was a part that accepted that I was reaping what I sowed...

"Until you saved me. And after hearing about your life of heroism, I can't look back at my old life without feeling a bit sick...and I'm not going back to it either," Bazett put her hand on Amy's shoulder. "I hope you can forgive me."

"Considering you guys made friends with people that blew up a military base in your own world, I'd say it'd be a bit hypocritical to exclude Bazett because of her own sins," That was Rin, making her grand entrance onto the scene. "If she's decided to change her ways, then it's all good, right?"

"I know that!" Amy half-shouted, "I was just...a little upset that after all this time we're going to have say goodbye. Are you going to be okay?"

"I'll be fine," Bazett assured Amy, "But our world is still too dangerous for you and your friends. But thank you," They hugged. "For everything."

Rin nodded, and gave them a minute. As frustrating Sonic's friends had made things, she couldn't help but feel grateful for what they've helped out with. *If it wasn't for them, I might never saved Sakura...*

But once the minute passed, the Tohsaka Master clapped her hands. "Okay. Lancer is going to where the last Chaos Emerald is. Archer and I are going to follow him while Sonic takes Amy back to the castle. Bazett, are you coming along?"

"Of course," Bazett said, standing up. "I have more experience with those Special Zones than you do. They're impossible to navigate for first-timers. What we see in there might be more than you can handle."

"Oh?" Rin smiled tightly. "How kind of you. But don't under estimate me. My capacity for surprise has been filled to the brim. I just hope

your Servant isn't all bark and no bite."

Sonic came up and tapped Amy on the shoulder. "Let's go, Amy. I don't think you wanna be here to watch this catfight."

Amy giggled, and gladly allowed herself to be held in Sonic's arms. To Bazett and Rin, she said, "We'll see you guys at the castle! Good luck!"

It was amazing, watching Illya work her Magecraft. Especially when she was using that Magecraft to repair the damage Eggman's invasion had done to Einzbern Castle. But Shirou couldn't help but feel a bit diminished when he compared it to his own skills. It was like she was the Elder sibling and he was the younger.

But that was silly.

While Illya restored the damage to the walls, floors, and ceilings, Shirou had been scouted to help fix the kitchen. With his experience in repairing, it was child's play to repair the stoves and ovens. The plumbing would be a bit trickier, but Shirou was actually grateful for it. The difficulty helped take his mind off of the gnawing pit in his stomach.

Outside, Tails continued to work on the Tornado's upkeep, while Knuckles helped out. From the sound of things, the biplane was all but finished. The Echidna would occasionally go back inside the castle to see if Shirou needed assistance with own repairs, but he was only needed if Shirou required a second hand to hold something he needed to fasten together.

"Hey, they're Back!" Tails called out.

"They" were Saber and Sakura, who had driven back into Fuyuki to pick up groceries. After taking a cab to the castle, the girls took a sports car for their errand, with Saber driving. The King of Knights

seemed to have an unusual attachment to the car, but was still decent enough drive.

"Did you get everything we needed?" Shirou asked, turning away from his work. He was about done, anyway.

"Yes, Shirou," Saber reported, carrying in at least six bags. "Sakura's ability to Determine bargains was remarkable."

Sakura blushed at Saber's praise. "Well... Since it's all for Sonic and friends' going-away party, I thought we shouldn't hold back."

"...Good job." Shirou was a bit confused at how forced his words sounded.

But he still went along with helping the girls and Animals unload the cards groceries. Once he was done, he went back to fixing up the kitchen, but his heart wasn't into it anymore. There was a heaviness that took his enthusiasm away.

As she helped load the refrigerator, Sakura would occasionally glance at Shirou. She would then look away, her face changing expressions in rapid succession. Finally, she stopped and turned to look at Shirou in full earnest.

" *Senpai*... Do you not want Sonic to leave?" Sakura asked.

Shirou froze. Tails looked up from the Tornadoes engine, while Saber, who had been setting up the picnic table with Illya, paused in her work. Illya, meanwhile, just hummed as she stole a taste, but still directed her gaze towards her brother. Shirou felt their eyes on him the way an ant feels the sun through a magnifying glass.

"I..." Shirou paused, trying to collect himself and articulate his thoughts. He hadn't intended to be called out so suddenly. But now that Sakura had said it so simply, he realized that she was right. Deep down, he *didn't* want Sonic to go. The past week or so had

been infuriating, nerve-wracking, and absolutely insane, but there was a part of him that loved it all the same.

Sonic was *fun* . Encouraging. He was full of himself but also full of hope for other people. He didn't make it easy, but the challenge of trying to deal with him was also enjoyable. And because of Sonic's presence, they've been able to make so much progress in the War. And what about afterwards? Shirou, by his own actions, had irreversibly changed the status quo by breaking the rule of secrecy. Shirou wasn't sure if he was strong enough to face that without Sonic's support. Could he be the hero he always dreamed of, the kind Kiritsugu never could, on his own?

And Sakura understood it quite well. After all, integrating herself into Shirou's household had provided some of the very few spots of light in an otherwise bleak existence. Long before the Holy War began, she had already accepted that someday Zouken's machinations would be the end of her. But she had accepted it, under the premise that she would be spared from seeing Shirou, Taiga, and even Rin die before her. And now that Zouken was gone and her life had been given a new lease, she knew that if anything threatened it she would have trouble dealing.

"Hey, it's okay, I get it," Tails said, hovering up to pat Shirou on the back. "It was the same thing when I first met Sonic."

Shirou looked at the fox, unsure of how to respond. But his eyes bid Tails to continue. Tails reached into one of his gloves and pulled out what seemed like an old photo.

"I was always kinda shy...because of these," Tails gestured at the furry appendages spinning about to keep him aloft. "But when I saw Sonic...he was so cool. He had this confidence and seemed like he could do anything. I just wanted to be like just that, and that's how it all started."

Tails showed Shirou the photo. The picture was that of Sonic, looking a bit shorter and rounder, standing on a beach somewhere. He

looked just as smooth as he did in the present, smirking and wagging his finger at the camera. Right next to him, maybe a foot behind, was a similarly diminished Tails, trying to imitate his pose. But instead of Sonic's borderline smug expression, Tails looked like he bursting with glee.

"I followed Sonic around endlessly, hoping that if I did what he did, I could be a hero like him," Tails continued, "But...after a while, I began to realize that if I ever wanted to be as cool as him, I had to do it my own way," He looked at Shirou and smiled, "And I'm sure that you can handle things here once we go home."

"And if you start to miss us, well, don't worry," Knuckles said, leaning against the wall. "You can never keep Sonic away for long. We just might end up bumping each other again."

"That's right," Saber said thoughtfully, "I remember Sonic once mentioning to me that you have a friend that lives in a world separate from your own?"

"That's right, Blaze." Tails said, "She sometimes pops in from the Sol Empire, which exists in another dimension..."

As the conversation went on, Shirou thought about it. While his heart would need time to process, his head understood the logic. Just because Sonic and friends were leaving didn't mean Shirou and the others couldn't finish what they started. And maybe they could meet again some day.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and another take his opposite hand. Shirou looked back and forth. Sakura had tentively resting her hand on the shoulder from behind, while at his side, Illya taken his hand.

He caught Saber's eye, and he realized that she was in a similar situation. She and the other remaining Servantshad been summoned as part of the Holy Grail War. What would happen to them once the War was over? Could the Masters maintain their presence with just their power alone?

He didn't want to think about losing anyone...

"Hey, guys!"

That was Sonic, walking into the room with Amy at his side. As everyone greeted them, Shirou hung in the back. For one moment in time, he didn't want to do anything just yet...

With their Servants in astral form, Rin and Bazett went into the city. Following Lancer's directions, they weaved through the crowds and in and out of alleyways. They didn't run, as that would have drawn too much attention. Rin and Archer debated warning Bazett about the deal they and Shirou struck with the agency, but decided that it would wait until after they got the Chaos Emerald. Maybe.

Eventually, the trail led them to a deserted building that had yet to be leased out. But the Special Zone wasn't in the main display room on the ground floor. He directed them towards the basement, and there in the center was the giant gold ring that acted as the Special Zone's gateway.

"I fought Knuckles here once," Lancer explained, "But when we ended up in this spot, he vanished from sight completely. At first, I thought he used his own powers to escape, but now that I know about these weird little pseudo-worlds the Chaos Emeralds create, it's obvious what happened that time."

"Knuckles probably fell right into the gate by accident," Rin guessed, "If he was captured by Caster soon afterwards, he might have forgotten."

"Or perhaps he just kept coming here and failed to retrieve the Emerald," Archer pointed out, "From what we've been told, even the natives of the other world have trouble dealing with these troublesome Special Zones sometimes."

"Let's all go in," Bazett said, "The more of us who enter, the more chances we have to find the Emerald in one entrance. Otherwise, we'll have to wait an entire day for the portal to reopen."

Rin nodded to agree, and the four of them jumped into the giant spinning ring. Rin had never been inside of a Special Zone before, and there was a part of her that was a little excited.

The portal dumped the Masters and Servants onto what seemed to be a small island floating in an endless white void. It was only an island in the most basic of terms; The landmass was completely flat, like a giant board being held up by its own power. On the surface, it seemed like a town park, with a path paved through neatly-cut grass, a winding path with the occasional tree that dotted the landscape. There were dozens, maybe hundreds of Power Rings that were bunched together in large bushels along the way, as well as strange blue orbs that were similarly gathered. Most vexing was that all of this seemed to be moving of its own will, like the entire ground was a treadmill, or a record on a player. The motion almost caused their Masters to fall over, but Archer and Lancelot only had to provide minimal support to help them upright. The four of them ended up strolling to maintain their balance.

" *This* is a Special Zone?" Rin asked, looking about in amazement. "No wonder Sonic's gang is so weird, if this is what they have to- Wait. Do you guys see that"

'That' was a what seemed like a set of digits floating up at the top of her vision. The numbers were counting down, and Rin was reminded the stats that Masters were granted on Servants the more they understood that Servant's capabilities.

"I see what seems like a countdown," Bazett responded, "If you see that as well, then it looks like we only have a limited time in here before the Zone forces us out."

"Look," Archer pointed up ahead, "There's the Emerald."

Not too far ahead was indeed the Chaos Emerald. It was being held in some kind of container that was floating up in the air. It seemed strange that something so important and crucial was being displayed so openly and closely. Bazett, who had been inside of a Special Zone before, knew that there had to be some kind of trick involved.

"I'll get it," Lancer announced, and ran after it. But instead of his usual A-Rank speed, Lancer found himself moving at the speed of a morning jogger. "Hey! What the heck!?"

"We're in a different plane of existence, separate from Fuyuki," Bazett mused, "So, there's a good chance that you're seperated from the abilities the Holy Grail granted you."

"Let's see if we can go the other way," Rin ordered, "You and Lancer keep going this way, Archer and I will swing around and try to head the Emerald off at the pass."

As it turned out, it was possible to run in the opposite direction while in the Special Zone. The problem was that it didn't do any good, as the Chaos Emerald's floating carrier seemed determined to avoid being touched by anybody. As no one was able to move at their optimal speeds of their own will, grabbing the Emerald was becoming quite the chore.

Luckily, they found that they could increase the amount of time they had in the Zone by collecting more Power Rings. However, the Zone only had a limited amount of Rings, and between four people, that meant there was still not a lot of time to go around.

"There's got to be something we can do!" Rin griped, "Archer! Try and shoot that thing down!"

"Might damage the Emerald," Archer responded, "But haven't you noticed that whenever one of use touches these weird blue orbs, that person becomes faster?"

"Are you sure?"

Archer reached out and grabbed an orb from a passing bushel. His pace instantly increased in speed. Catching on, Rin also began to try and grab orbs as they went by. In the distance, she could see the Lancer team adopt a similar strategy. This made chasing down the Chaos Emerald a little easier, but there were other obstacles. There were pitfalls in the path, and the Masters and Servants had to be mindful of where the holes were, as the faster they became, the harder it was to control their movements. Furthermore, while the paved areas of the Special Zone were easy to run in, the grass slowed them down considerably, forcing the four of them to jump in order to get anywhere near the Emerald, which seemed to have an interest in floating over the grassy areas. That meant more leaping, which was tricky when they were near floating clumps of spike balls. They littered the path, and if they were like the ones from the Special Zone Shirou entered, hitting one would mean dropping Rings.

Bazett learned this the hard way when she misjudged how far she could jump and ended up crashing into one. Some rings fell from her, but she recovered quickly.

"I'm fine!" Bazett insisted, "But my timer just went down!"

If collecting Rings increased how much time we have in here, then of course losing them would do the opposite, Archer figured, and Projected a bow. "So all we have to do is avoid hitting those things with our bodies, right?"

Archer a slew of Projected arrows fly, destroying a group of spike balls and allowing Rin to pass through the smoke unharmed. However, not long after she did, the spike balls reappeared. Evidently, only the Rings would stay gone when touched.

"That's how a Servant protects their Master." Archer called out to Lancer.

Not to be baited, Lancer *threw* his spears, destroying several spike balls at once. The spear instantly returned to his hands, allowing him to repeat his method. Nonetheless, this began a new stratagem

where the Servants would focus their efforts on destroying the spike balls and allow their own Masters to focus on the Chaos Emerald. The two ladies would gather more of the blue orbs to increase their speed, and slowly but surely closed the gap the Chaos Emerald seemingly insisted on maintaining. They ran about, going faster and faster, and the entire track seemed to spin wildly just to keep up. Anyone watching from above would compare the Special Zone's setting to a record being played at maximum speed, with a few dots zipping here and there.

But things started to go wrong near the end.

The first was that while king out some spike balls for Bazett, Lancer suddenly and inexplicably vanished. Using their powers was causing the Servants' countdowns to quicken. While Archer had been more economic with his arrows, Lancer hadn't with his spear.

"Lancer!" Bazett cried in alarm. But because she had been distracted by Lancer's disappearance, she hadn't been watching where she was going and crashed into another set of spike balls. She recovered quickly enough, but still had dropped quite a few Rings. Her countdown was in the single digits and there were no more Rings in sight. Grabbing another bunch of blue balls to increase her speed, Bazett used a rune to put even more strength into her legs and shot towards the Chaos Emerald. Getting closer and closer, Bazett was inches away from touching the Emerald when her countdown hit zero. Once it did, she seemed to fade away from the world. Archer, watching Bazett from a long distance, thought it looked very much like how a Servant's life in a Holy Grail would end.

Of course, it's not like she's dead, Bazett was just removed from the Zone like Lancer was, Archer figured, Still, we're running low on time.

"Archer, I have an idea," Rin said, "Shoot near the Emerald- Not at the Emerald, Just a few feet in front of it."

"Why-?"

"Just do it!" Rin had a determined expression on her face, but an inquisitive look in her eyes.

Archer did what she asked, letting an arrow fly towards the Chaos Emerald. As Rin ordered, the arrow struck the road very short distance in front of the Emerald. The moment it landed, the Emerald changed course and began to float in the opposite direction- towards Rin and Archer!

"I'm going ahead, Archer!" Rin declared, grabbing more orbs to push herself even faster. "Keep that Emerald from going anywhere but towards me!"

Her skirt is too short. Archer thought as he obeyed.

Rin shot forward, leaping over groups of spike balls, some arranged like hedges or fences with gaps, others that swung around in circles. The Tohsaka Master was moving at speeds comparable to a Servant, a testament to both the strange physics of the Special Zone and her own drive to succeed. Too many times Rin had been outdone or humiliated, too many times had her own power come up short compared to the allies and enemies around her. All of her being was now focused on this one task; to get the Emerald!

Sonic, Tails...those guys saved Emiya, they saved my sister... Rin thought as she ran, *And they saved me.*

Once she was close enough, Rin pumped her legs full of Prana with Reinforcement and leapt.

I have to repay them!

When the light faded from their eyes, Lancer and Bazett saw that they were back in the empty room they had entered the Zone in. The giant ring was gone, of course. It likely wasn't going to return until another day or so had passed. If the Archer team failed, that is...

"Whoa, this feels weird," Lancer commented, rubbing his head. "Going from losing the Grail's blessings and back again...bit of a rush."

"Special Zones are just as chaotic as the Emeralds they protect," Bazett admitted, "Just be glad you never entered the first one I did. *That* Zone was weird. I didn't know which way was up..."

Lancer smirked, "I would have liked to see what that was like. Still, I wonder how Archer and his Master are doing?" He nodded at the space where the giant ring had been. "Think they'll be able to get the gem without us?"

"You tell me," Bazett replied, "After all, you have more experience with them. From what you've seen of the Special Zone and what you know of their abilities...will this be our only visit?"

Lancer leaned back against the wall and rubbed his chin in thought, frowning. "Well...I don't know much about his Master, Archer's pretty tough. Whenever we fought, he always seemed to know what I was going to do...but, it wasn't like he read my mind or anything. More like instinct born of experience. But his stats..."

Bazett nodded. As a Master of the Holy Grail War, the Grail granted her with the ability to see the strength rating for a Servant's abilities. But whenever she checked Archer, his stats were *terrible*. Almost all of them were ranked C, with the exception of his Independent Action and Mind's True Eye abilities, which were ranked B. A strange contradiction, one that would have been interesting to figure out if they were still fighting the Holy Grail War. *What kind of Heroic Spirit is both weak and strong at the same time?*

The Lancer Team's musings were interrupted by a flash of light as both Archer and Rin reappeared into the world. Rin had almost fallen to her knees, but Archer was keeping her steady. The physics of the real world were catching up, reminding the teenager that, Mage or not, running at intense velocities was a thing that should happen

without consequences. With her thighs and lungs burning, Rin still smiled victoriously as she held up the blue Chaos Emerald.

When Rin and Bazett had arrived at Einzbern Castle with their prize in hand, it put everyone in a good mood. The blue Chaos Emerald was added to the collection, the seven lights creating a miniature rainbow that shined above the armored briefcase. Rin particularly basked in both the glow of the jewels and her own pride at having accomplished the feat.

"Hey, I already knew about that Special Zone," Knuckles put in, "I've just been too busy to go fetch it."

This, of course, set off an entire new slew of bickering, friendly jabs, and general one-upmanship. From a safe distance, Shirou and Sakura worked together to cook an irregular feast for the group. Shirou had wanted to focus just on traditional Japanese dishes, but somehow, whenever he had his back turned, there was a modern, western dish being cooked. He had a feeling that as a prank, either Sonic or Knuckles would sneak into his personal garden, the kitchen, and mess around with the pots and pans. It was all in good fun, and to their credit did not mess with the meals Shirou and Sakura were working on. Although, it may have been Shirou's imagination, but when Knuckles tried to snag a taste from one of the pots, the look Sakura sent him seemed to be from red eyes. Knuckles wisely decided that he could wait until everything was ready.

We should probably have Rin and Illya give Sakura a check-up to make sure she's completely clean of the Shadow's corruption...

Of course, there were no other problems throughout the party, so the thought passed from Shirou's mind. Soon the meal was prepared, served, and everyone was eating.

"Is this what you've been living on, Saber?" Lancer commented in between bites. "No wonder you've always been so gung-ho about protecting your Master."

"Do not belittle me by making light of my pact to my Master," Saber said firmly, "There is more to my bond with Shirou than mere gastronomic pleasures."

...She said while devouring her third helping. Shirou thought. Nonetheless, he appreciated Saber's words. Every guy wants to be loved, especially by a pretty girl.

"Speaking gastronomic pleasures, try one of these," Sonic said, holding out something to Lancer. It was a cooked sausage wrapped in a piece of sliced bread with a generous amount of hot sauce and bean slathered on. "It's my uncle's recipe."

Being the sort to never refuse charity (Or else), Lancer took the foodstuff from Sonic. After briefly sniffing it, he took a bite. A big smile appeared and he ate the rest almost instantly. "Hey, not bad! What's this called?"

Sonic's smile morphed into a smirk. "A chili dog."

"WHHAAAATT?!" Lancer turned white, gagged, and had a total breakdown. Everyone, even Bazett, couldn't help but laugh at his overreaction.

"It's okay, Lancer," Tails said, stopping the blue-haired Servant from using his spear to scrap off his tongue. "Despite the name, chili dogs aren't made from canines."

"Actually, I'm not even sure if they're made from any animal." Knuckles commented.

Once the food was finished (Mostly by Saber, but everyone got a fair amount. Knuckles came a close second in amount eaten), Sonic and his friends took over cleaning the dishes. But rather than gather them up in a neat and orderly fashion, Tails and Sonic made it a game where Tails would use his tails to sweep the plates and silverware into the air, and Sonic would speed around, catching the plates before the tossing them into the kitchen. There, Amy would

catch and stack the dishes by the sink, which Knuckles would wash without hesitation.

Feeling a bit surpufluous, Shirou found himself wandering away and outside the Castle. There, he found Archer keeping watch.

"What are you doing?" Shirou asked, although it was more like, "Who are you watching for?" And they both knew the answer to that. Both Gilgamesh and Eggman were still out there.

"Are you having fun?" Archer chose to ask his own question.

"Yeah, actually," Shirou said, "Just came out here for some fresh air."

Silence reigned. There was this incredibly awkward feeling in the air. Things were always awkward between Shirou and Archer, but usually the past awkwardness was laced with a trace of bitterness.

"I suppose you must be happy to have met Sonic," Archer remarked, "I guess being a hero should be easy, now, that you've" That sounded bitter, but there was a hint of wistful envy somewhere within.

"...Actually, I think it's going to be harder than I realized." Shirou said at last.

Archer looked at Shirou as if he had grown a second head.

"...What?"

Shirou sat on down on one of the steps to the castle, the way he and Kiritsugu did at the Estate. "I guess...it was Kiritsugu, my father, who inspired me to become a hero. I wanted to be the hero he couldn't. But, Kiritsugu failed to be a hero. He couldn't do it. I just...I think there was a part of me that figured that as long as I did better than Kiritsugu, it would be enough."

I didn't even know what Kiritsugu did at first. Archer thought, but Shirou's words were beginning to make the gears in his head turn,

very slowly.

Unaware of Archer's thoughts, Shirou continued. "But now, meeting Sonic, hearing about his adventures...it's making me realize what a long road becoming a hero truly is. It sounds easy for him, but I can't even do half the amazing things Sonic can. How can I match that?"

That...was a wrinkle Archer had never considered. Ever since he had become a Counter Guardian, he had come to the conclusion that going down the path of a hero was to be blame in itself. But maybe it was because the path he followed hadn't been very well-defined. Without any real example to follow, he had wallowed in self-destructive single-mindedness until they led him to his current station in life. Would things have turned out different, if he had met Someone like Sonic in his life? Someone who was also a hero, but refused to let himself become separate from the people?

After considering that notion, Archer decided to say his piece. "I think...the fact that you're worried means you'll have a better chance of succeeding than you would on blind faith and empty confidence. Dealing with those doubts, but not ignoring them or letting them bury you...that might be how you become a hero.

"Once...I remember hearing about this person who wanted to become a hero," Archer looked up at the sky. "Like you, he- they didn't really have any clear reference for heroism. They just rushed into that life without a second thought, and made a bad decision that ended up costing more lives than they saved. As long as you go down your path at your own pace, you'll be..."

Archer suddenly broke off his speech as he frowned. Shirou didn't get it at first, until he heard it as well; A high-pitched noise in the distance, almost like the sound an anvil being dropped in an American *anime* .

Archer Projected a bow and immediately fired a broken Phantasm. The shot connected to whatever was incoming, causing a huge explosion. But before the smoke could clear, several more golden

bolts shot through, striking the castle. The building shook from the impact.

Although he couldn't see who fired, Archer already knew who the culprit was. *It's Gilgamesh!* He sent a telepathic message to Rin. *He's making his move!* Only the King of Heroes had the power to attack the castle from such a distance.

"Archer!" Shirou pointed in the direction opposite from where Gilgamesh was shooting. "Robots!"

Indeed there were. Dozens of land-Badniks were crawling out from between the trees, while flying robots came in from the horizon. A horde of bizarre, metal creatures, a menagerie of mecha madness, spilling out and into the courtyard. Archer and Shirou exchanged a worldless looks and prepared for the seige. Projecting a bow and arrows, Shirou began to fire at the Badniks, purposely aiming for their joints to inhibit their movements. Meanwhile, Archer watched the skies with Reinforced eyes, trying to figure where Gilgamesh was. He could just barely see a dot on in distance...and shining dot.

It didn't take long for the rest of the group to spring into action. Sonic and his friends burst out the doors and ran towards the Badnik barrage, while Saber and Lancer joined Archer. Not long afterwards, Rin and Bazett came out as well, but they did not join Sonic's group in fighting the robot invasion. Instead, they hung back at the entrance, trashing any robots that got past Team Sonic.

Archer, Illya says that Gilgamesh entered the Boundary Field from the southeast! Rin told Archer via mind-link.

As if on cue, another missile that was actually a supernatural, ancient weapon flew at the castle from just that direction. Archer was already preparing to block the attack himself, but Lancer was faster, and had intercepted the weapon with his spear.

While this went on, Saber ran towards the dot. "We cannot allow Gilgamesh the room to freely attack us!" She shouted, leaping onto

and through the tree tops.

Lancer and Archer quickly followed. With his higher speed rank, Lancer soon overtook Saber, while she and Archer managed to keep up. With his eyes Reinforced, however, Archer was the first to get a good look at Gilgamesh.

The King of Heroes was sitting atop some kind of flying vehicle, sitting in a throne like the divine monarch. The aircraft looked nothing like the models produced by mundane manufacturers, it was as ornate and splendid as the finest of jewels, made from a gold-ish metal and jewels finer than emeralds.

When Archer reported this, Saber recognized it as the craft he flew during the Fourth Holy War against the most terrible of Caster's vile abominations, the *Vimana*. She prepared to unleash her Noble Phantasm onto it, but Lancer stopped her.

"Hold it, Saber," Lancer said, "I get you want to finish this quickly, but you never play your best hand right outside the gate."

"He's right," Archer said, "For all we know, Gilgamesh probably has a way to block *Excalibur* somewhere inside the *Gate of Babylon*. Let's get closer and see if we can find a better chance to attack."

They did, and meanwhile Gilgamesh continued to fire ancient weapons. First he tried to shoot them over their heads and at the castle, but the Servants were able to react in time to block the attacks. After the first slew, the *Gate of Babylon* began to point at the Servants directly. Instead of blocking the following attacks, the Servants chose to dodge them, zigging, zagging, and jumping, avoiding certain death by the skin of their teeth. And once they were close enough, Gilgamesh began to speak.

"Ha ha ha," Gilgamesh chuckled, "Were you enjoying that quaint indoor picnic? I'm sorry, but for beings summoned to fight for possession of the Grail, such a display just isn't fitting."

"Because that was part of your plan with Kotomine, wasn't it?" Saber shouted back, "Have us destroy each other so you could claim the Grail from whoever was left. Are you here to challenge us because it failed? Or did you think we would just quarrel for your amusement?"

Gilgamesh just laughed again. "Ah, that defiant temper...I wonder, if you did submit to be my wife, would be even half attractive?"

"Bored now."

That was Lancer, who immediately leapt up to board the *Vimana* . Gilgamesh responded to his intrusion by opening the *Gate of Babylon* and unleashing a slew of sacred weapons like a gatling gun. Lancer's spear became a blur as his Protection From Arrows skill enabled him to deflect and dodge the onslaught while slowly closing the gap.

But instead of waiting for that to happen, Gilgamesh was suddenly at Lancer's side. He grabbed the spear and then delivered a powerful kick to the Hound's side. As he did this, Saber was instantly upon Gilgamesh, bringing her sword down onto him. With his free hand, Gilgamesh reached within the *Gate of Babylon* and pulled out another sword to block her strike. As the blades connected, Archer fired a slew of Projected Broken Phantasms at the King of Heroes. The *Gate of Babylon* opened again and *Enkidu* came out, twisting and curving in the air to block the attacks. Gilgamesh then grabbed Lancer and Saber by their arms and threw them off of the *Vimana* before following up with another barrage from the *Gate of Babylon*. Archer was immediately in front of his fellow Servants his hand raised.

" *Rho Aias!* " The shield Archer summoned shook and cracked as the treasured weapons hammered against it. Archer gritted his teeth and felt himself be pushed back slightly from their force. Behind him, Saber and Lancer quickly recovered and raced around the bowman to continue their battle.

But when smoke from the explosions cleared, the *Vimana* was gone. Gilgamesh was gone. The Servants looked about in confusion.

"Wha- He ran away?" Lancer asked, disappointed. "But we were just getting started!"

"And it is tragic how deluded you are, that you think you are worth my time."

And there was Gilgamesh, leaning against a tree. It was as if he and they had not just been fighting a battle to the death. Not a single strand of his spiky hair was out of place.

"This has been a lovely diversion," Gilgamesh continued, examining his nails. "But I see no reason to indulge in this charade any more."

The *Gate of Babylon* opened once again, far wider than it had thus far. The fired weapons struck the ground, kicking up tons of dirt and smoke from the explosion. Not bothering to wait for it to clear, both Saber and Lancer charged through, intent on finishing Gilgamesh once and for all.

"Damn it!" Lancer growled, "He took off, for real this time!"

The voice of the King of Heroes drifted out on the wind, his tone both haughty and haunting. "This world is not fit for superior beings such as myself. The time is coming for this world to be...upgrade into something more suitable..."

"You are certainly suited for *running away!* " Saber shouted pointlessly. She was either infuriated at the apparent cowardice of a man who would not complete a battle, or just vexed by Gilgamesh's attitude in general.

"This does fill kinda juvenile. Maybe it's a king's idea of throwing eggs at someone's house?" Lancer remarked, leaning on his spear for support. "Oh well. Let's get back to the castle, maybe we can tear up some of those robots before the others are done."

Archer, who had been puzzling over Gilgamesh's odd choice of words, suddenly broke into a run. Saber seemed to have a similar epiphany and chased after him.

The battle against the Badnik horde wasn't nearly as exciting as the short ones the Servants had with Gilgamesh. Sonic's group had been destroying robots for so long that it was second nature to them, and the Masters were fast learners. It took some effort and there were a few close calls, they were successful in reducing the Badniks to scrap. However, despite the ease with which they removed the invaders, none of them felt very victorious.

"No sub-boss, no Eggman, just the rank and file," Sonic scratched the back of his head. "Ever get the feeling that this was too easy?"

"None of them even went after the Chaos Emeralds," Tails noted, "They just tried to overwhelm us."

Rin hummed thoughtfully. "What I don't like is how they showed up at the same time Gilgamesh did. It can't be a coincidence."

"Perhaps Gilgamesh saw them coming and decided it was too good an opportunity to pass up?" Shirou asked, but he didn't sound convinced of his words.

Knuckles held up the head of a Catterkiller as if about to do a soliloquy. But instead, he just tossed it over his shoulders. "Well, whatever they were trying to do, it didn't work. Let's go catch up with Saber's team and see if they need-"

" *SENPAI!* "

Out from the castle's entrance came Sakura. She was running, and it nearly stumbled over every fifth step. She seemed frantic. Her face, which had begun to regain its color, was pale again. She looked like she was on the brink of crying.

"It...took her!" She gasped as she came up. Rin was already at her side, to keep her steady.

"What? Who? Who took her? And which her?" Shirou asked, his danger senses tingling.

"I...Illya," Sakura panted, still out of breath. "The robot..."

Shirou felt his blood go cold.

"What robot?" Sonic asked suddenly, "And what happened to Illya?"

Where was Illya? She had remained in the castle to keep an eye on Sakura in case the stress of the situation would cause her to relapse.

"It took her..." Sakura whispered, covering her face in shame. "The robot took her..."

"What kind of robot could take Illya?" Amy asked, "Doesn't she have magic?"

"It was a robot..." Sakura whimpered, "...that looked like *Sonic*. "

To be continued_

Tiger Dojo

Taiga: Insert Token! Press start for Taiga Dojo! I am your instructor, Fujimura Taiga!

Irisviel: HI, Everyone! My name is Irisviel von Einzbern. It's a pleasure to meet you!

Taiga: *Shishou?! What are you doing here?*

Irisviel: Well, I thought you could use the help. With Illya kidnapped, and all. Poor Girl!

Taiga: Ahhh, how can you say that so casually?! Our girl has been taken by some evil robot, and you're just standing there.

Irisviel: I'm sure it will turn out right in the end. *(It's already too late)*

Taiga: Huh? *Shishou*, did you...

Irisviel: All right, Zecchan, how do we do this? Just answer questions from the readers, is that right?

Taiga: Er, yeah. Ahem. Godzillahero3 asks, "Are you going to introduce Mordred into your story?"

Irisviel: Oh, the query of a reader who wants their favorite character to appear, but is too lazy to write their own story where those circumstances appear!

Taiga: *Shishou*, that was really cruel! But, at this time, no. The Servants from *Zero* were able to appear because of their essence was contained in the Shadow, which was made from the Fourth War's Grail mud. If Mordred would appear, it won't be in this story.

Irisviel: And since the author is too lazy and half-hearted to make a sequel, it's unlikely she'll be featured at all.

Taiga: (Urk...is she taking out a mother's anxiety onto all of us?) Anyway, our next question is from Bender: "Why a Ruler Class Servant wasn't summoned?"

Irisviel: The Holy Grail only summons a Ruler Servant when it feels the concept of the Holy Grail War is endangered itself. Because Dr. Eggman's methods are based on technology for the most part, it hasn't sensed any particular threat yet. Of course, Rulers were only introduced to flesh out and revitalize a stagnant franchise, so it's more likely that the author doesn't want to juggle another pointless character around!

Taiga: *Sh-Shishou!* You'll get us written out!

Irisviel: I just wonder if these segments just introduce readers with the assumption they can influence the story to suit their tastes. Oh well! I guess we have time for one more question. This is from ESCANOR. "Have the Author seen the PS2 version of Fate/ Stay Night Realta Nua: Last Episode?" I should certainly hope so! In fact, in the final chapter...

Taiga: Spoilers, *Shishou*, no spoilers! That's all the time we have left, we'll see you at the next practice!

Irisviel: Zecchan, how cruel to tease like that!

Deeper

Chapter 27: Deeper

Fighters for Japan's air force witnessed an unidentified flying object speeding out from Kyushu and towards international waters. Due to the immense velocity the UFO was moving at, none of the pilots or their equipment could fix on its exact appearance. The most they could determine was that whatever it the size of a small child or so. If they could have taken a better look, they would have seen an *actual* child being carried by some kind of jet turbine with arms, legs, and a head. The only reason why the poor girl wasn't being torn apart by the G-forces was that the machine seemed to be contained in a bubble of energy that shielded both of them from the wind resistance.

It all began barely five minutes ago...

The Servants were going out to confront Gilgamesh. Sonic and Shirou's groups were going out to fight off the robots. All that left were Sakura and Illya, who would remain inside the castle. It bothered Illya that she was forced to babysit Rin's traumatized sister, but decided that remaining in Shirou's good graces would be enough. At the very least, it would give her something to hold over Tohsaka once this was all over.

If she lasted that long, anyway.

It was ironic, actually. Both girls, designed to act as vessels for the Holy Grail so their clans could achieve the glory that was the Heaven's Feel. But while Sakura had been spared from her fate, Illya's was still ambiguous.

There was a crash that caused some plaster to fall from the ceiling. While Sakura flinched, Illya just rolled her eyes. She missed Berserker.

" One of Eggman's robots probably snuck past everyone else," Illya stated calmly, "Don't worry about it."

" Why aren't you worried about all of this?" Sakura asked, "Servants fighting is one thing..."

" All mages- all Proper Mages- are trained to handle any sort of danger," Illya said standoffishly. "But if it bothers you that much, I, as the mistress of this castle, will repel the intruder."

Illya turned to face whatever weird-looking automaton had lucked its way past the defense force of Servants, mages and mascot characters. She had a confident, maybe overconfident, smile on her face. It was the look of a cat who was just found a one-winged canary.

Only this time, the 'canary' was actually a falcon.

Sakura, whose time in the archery club had given her somewhat better eyes for tracking targets, was the first to see it coming. Illya, her guard down from hubris, felt the wind rush out as a metal fist collided with her gut. It was a calculated blow, just enough force to knock her out, but it held back enough so as not to cause serious harm. Illya fell into the robot's arms.

" Let her go!" Sakura shouted, her concern overruling her shock and fear. She picked up the piece of plaster that raised it over head with intent to strike.

Then the robot looked at her.

And Sakura stopped, because unlike the comic and cartoonish eyes used on the majority of the Badniks, or the blank stares of the more 'normal' robots, these eyes bore into her. It was a stare that was both intense and and yet it glazed over her. Those eyes told her that she was both not a threat and what would happen if she tried appear as one.

There was a sound like a jet engine warming up, and the robot, with Illya, were encased into what seemed like a bubble of light. And then they were gone, a hole in the wall being the only sign of where they went. There were several walls, actually, creating a path all the way to the outside of the castle.

With a gasp, Sakura ran out towards the doors where the rest were.

Agent Stuart was finishing up what he hoped was a decent report for the Fuyuki case. It took a great deal of creative interpretation, but he figured that he had found a way to summarize his findings in a way that was both factual, but not liable to get him cashiered by his superiors or killed by this secret society Emiya and Tohsaka had mentioned. It helped that they had already found the dead bodies underneath Fuyuki Church, otherwise it would have been impossible to blame it all on Kotomine.

That was not to say that they were done, of course. Eggman was still out there. And from what he had heard, there seemed to be another incursion of his robots in the region where the Einzbern Castle was. It was uncanny that Eggman could somehow get his robots passed military patrols and radar without anyone catching wise. While the larger automatons could be seen (Although not stopped, unfortunately), the smaller robots seemed to just appear in the country without any warning. It was almost they were coming out of thin air.

It was then that Stuart's cell phone rang. Stuart retreated to a private place to take the call privately. Since it was to the number he used for his civilian identity, he assumed it was from someone involved with Homurahara Academy.

Putting on his most casual tone, Stuart answered the phone. "Hello, this is Stuart."

" *Mr. Stuart. This is Saber, speaking,* " The soft but steely female voice replied, " *We need your help.* "

Stuart briefly felt a moment of panic, but forced himself to be calm. "Ahh, is it for the reopening of school?"

" It's about Eggman, " Her tone was clipped. " We need to know where he is. We know that you're an agent for the government. I heard your voice feeding questions to the officer interrogating Shirou, Rin, and myself. Archer also discovered you while investigating your base. "

Stuart had no idea how to respond. While an agent's cover being blown on the field wasn't a total anomaly, to hear it happen so quickly was unheard of.

Still, there was no reason for Stuart to just let it go on. He opted to play dumb. "I'm afraid I don't know what you are talking-"

" Eggman has kidnapped one of our friends, " Saber interrupted, " We need to find his base for a rescue mission. "

That shut Stuart up. Before his brain could reactivate and have his mouth ask for more questions, Saber spoke again.

" I don't think the military is happy to just allow Eggman to attack this country without retaliating, " Saber went on, " If they have gained any insight on the whereabouts of his hideout, we would like to have it. "

"You can't expect me to give you confidential information like that out of hand," Stuart protested, "I could be fired at best, and arrested at worst."

" Mr. Stuart, when we first met, we were both pretending to be less than what we are, " Saber said, " But I was not lying when I said I came to this land to aid Shirou. I am willing to risk it all to protect this nation, just as you are."

Stuart recalled the battle of Homurahara Academy. He remembered that the military had been unable to stop Eggman's relentless assault

on the school. And he remembered the strange lady that appeared with Sonic to fight against him.

Stuart sighed, and, choosing his words carefully, said, "I would love to help, but we're having trouble locating Eggman ourselves. The military can't launch a suitable search effort when we're trying to stop giant robots from entering the country from the north-west. They *always* come in from the north-west."

"... *Understood.* " The connection broke.

Once it was over, Stuart sighed and leaned back against the wall. He had just broke at least five regulations in one sitting. *I just hope this pays off.*

"Agent Stuart?" An aide came up with a report in hand. "You might want to see this..."

Once they had gotten Stuart's rather subtle directions, it was easy to plot out a course towards Eggman's base. Tails confirmed that the direction Eggman's sub-bosses kept entering the city in was on the same pathway the Flying Torpedo flew on from the harbor. All that was left was to arrange a battle-strategy. It was obvious that Gilgamesh's timely appearance at the raid meant he and Eggman were now working together. Which meant that the rescue of Illya needed to be more intelligent than 'Rush in, wreck stuff, find her and get out.'

"I am going," Saber decided in a voice that once ruled Camelot. "I can defeat Gilgamesh while the rest of you find Illya and stop Eggman."

"Oh no, you're getting all of the fun," Lancer protested, "I'm going too."

"Ditto." Archer said. His face was without emotion, but his voice carried an undertone of threat if his demand wasn't met.

"So I guess we're all going?" Shirou asked. He didn't like the idea of having to travel anywhere with Archer and Lancer, but Illya's safety was more important to him than his own comfort. He could stomach their presence if it meant saving his sister.

"Uh, actually..." Tails began, but was summarily ignored.

"You're staying," Archer ordered, "This will be hard enough without having to protect your weak ass."

"Guys?" Tails tried again, to no avail.

"You don't have to trouble yourself on my behalf." Shirou shot back.

"We have no idea what Eggman's base is like," Rin considered, "We should *all* go, for strength in numbers."

Tails finally gave up talking and put both fingers in his mouth. Before he let out a shrill whistle that, in sequence, caused their ears to ache and their eyes to focus on him.

"Great team spirit, guys," Tails said, "But...this isn't a airline jet."

Part of the problem was that the *Tornado* could only hold a small amount of people, due to its weight-limit. And even then they had to take into account how to keep the bi-plane's agility in the air. While it could hold the entirety of Sonic's group, there was some difficulty determining who else could come.

"Rin, Bazett and I could come," Shirou suggested, "Once we're at Eggman's base, we can summon our Servants with our Command Seals."

"Not enough room on the *Tornado*," Knuckles commented, "I don't think you guys are used to standing on the wings like we are."

"I can do that." Archer put in. Lancer had an eager expression that indicated he was more than willing to give it a try as well.

"But can you fly effectively with two grown men hanging on?" Bazett asked, "I doubt Eggman will just let you approach his...Saucer without retaliating."

"Yeah, that's gonna be tricky," Tails conceded, "I've been able to keep Sonic in the air when fighting Eggman's air forces, but with three guys..."

A lightbulb turned on in Rin's head. "What if Archer and Lancer go in astral form? Then their weight won't effect the *Tornado* at all!"

Tails scratched his head in thought. "Yeah, that could work, I think."

"What about the rest of us?" Shirou asked.

"Hey!" Amy spoke up, "Maybe that agent guy Saber called could loan us a plane, or something. I mean, the military is probably planning to take down Eggman too, right? They must have something ready."

"It did not sound that way," Saber admitted, "And, Mr. Stuart is bound by the laws of this state and the rules of his position. I doubt he could arrange anything fast enough."

"So, we just send the Servants," Bazett decided, "We Masters will remain behind and focus on providing them with Mana so they can help fight against Eggman's robots and Gilgamesh."

"What about the Chaos Emeralds?" Shirou tried one last tack, "Can't we use them to teleport to Eggman's base?"

Knuckles said, "Only if we know the exact location. Just the general direction won't help. And the only reason you and Sonic were able to find us after escaping the Matou place is because your Emerald homed in on the Emerald Avenger had."

"Our enemy is both Dr. Eggman and Gilgamesh," Saber said, "We can't afford to be reckless."

Shirou looked down, frustrated. He couldn't argue with the logic, not for lack of trying. He could feel the heat of the Fire of Fuyuki, once again unable to help anyone. After all the training he did and progress he made, he was still useless when it counted. He fumed.

Sonic, who had been uncharacteristically quiet during this debate, hopped down from where he was sitting on the *Tornado*'s wings. He walked up to Shirou and patted the back of his legs. "Tell ya what. Next, if one *your* budsgets kidnapped, *you* can go and I'll stay behind."

"Actually, I'd rather it was someone like Archer or Lancer staying behind." Shirou replied, which got a few laughs. But not much.

And so, Archer and Lancer faded from sight as they entered their astral forms. Saber sat in the backseat of the *Tornado* and Amy Rose awkwardly squeezed in to sit on her lap. It was a somber moment, as not only were the departing heroes leaving to face Eggman, but Sonic's group would possibly be leaving the universe. Both Eggman and Gilgamesh were dangerous on their own, but together the potential for disaster was skyrocketing. Splitting them apart with Chaos Control would be the only chance the universe had for survival. So the takeoff was delayed so everyone could say goodbye.

"Be careful, Amy." Bazett warned, "And thanks for everything."

"You're welcome," Amy said, fidgeting on Saber's lap. "And dont worry about us. We do this sort of thing all the time!"

Rin, meanwhile, was giving the main engine of the biplane was a suspicious look. "Are you sure the *Tornado* can make the trip? If you get into trouble, you won't be able to land for repairs."

But Tails wasn't worried. "This baby can handle anything. If worse comes to worse, we'll just crash-land on the Egg Saucer."

"Right..." Rin looked away, biting on her lips. After a moment, she reached up, grabbed Tails, and pulled him into a hug. " *I'm going to miss you.* " She whispered.

Tails chuckled awkwardly, but still smiled and patted Rin on the back. "Right back at ya."

Knuckles had taken a seat on the *Tornado* 's back end. He noticed Sakura was still looking at her feet, obviously despondent at having lost Illya.

"Hey," He called out to Sakura, "There wasn't anything you could do. Don't bring yourself down. Leave it to us, we'll get her back.

At his words, Sakura couldn't help but smile faintly. She hadn't been particularly close to any of Sonic's group, but she deeply appreciated how their presence and actions had change their fates...especially her's.

But Shirou wasn't smiling. He hated not being involved in something like this. It was his thirst for justice taking hold...or, according to those more cynical, it was still unresolved amounts of emotional trauma bubbling up. But truly, those were just excuses he focuses on to avoid the truth...

As he looked up at the *Tornado* 's wing, where Sonic had retaken his place, the Hedgehog didn't seem particularly happy about how things were going either.

"It's too bad we couldn't see enough of your world," Sonic remarked, "But it was nice while it lasted."

"From what you've told me about yours, our world isn't that impressive." Shirou replied, a bit hollow.

Sonic gave Shirou a knowing look and said, " *Every* world is impressive. The trick is to learning to see it."

Shirou hadn't thought about it like that.

"Shirou," Saber spoke up. While she knew that Sonic's words may have helped, they wouldn't be enough to settle the dissatisfaction brewing in her Master. She had seen enough of Shirou's life in her dreams that what he truly hated was being useless. Hopefully, her words would put him at ease. "Please make sure our victory meal is prepared," She flashed him a comforting, confident smile that had every ounce of her Rank B Charisma poured in, "For we'll need it when we return."

Shirou felt his heart lift, albeit slightly. Off to the side, both Rin and Sakura felt twinges of jealousy in their souls.

The noise filled the air as Tails started the biplane's engine. Shirou, Rin, Sakura and Bazett quickly got away so the *Tornado* could take off. The last Shirou saw before they vanished over the horizon was Sonic's and Saber's eyes, looking into his.

Feeling frustrated and impotent, the humans only remained at Illya's Castle for a short while. Shirou tried to distract himself by cleaning a bit of the rubble caused by Eggman's attack, but found he had no motivation. So, with Bazett at the wheel, the Masters and Sakura drove back to Fuyuki. None of them spoke to each other.

When they arrived back at the Emiya Estate, they just drifted apart. Rin and Bazett sat at the table. Sakura busied herself by making some tea for everyone. Shirou found himself wandering. He ended up in the more unused area of the Estate, near the rooms Saber and Sonic had been given. While Saber's room was almost bare of anything beyond basic amenities, Sonic had turned his room into a little man-cave. The blanket to set up a makeshift hammock. It was a wonder that fabric hadn't gotten punctured by Sonic's quills. There were also slightly tattered magazines scattered here and there. Sonic must have picked these up during his runs around the city. No doubt

Saber's room, on the other hand, didn't have any magazines or reading material. According to Rin, the Holy Grail supplied Servants with general knowledge of the modern world, so Saber already knew how to coexist in the present time period. (Shirou had been briefly disappointed that there wouldn't be any 'adjustment hijinks.) However, while cleaner and more orderly than Sonic's room, it wasn't devoid of personal flavor. Sitting on the bed was the stuffed lion toy Shirou had given to Saber. And off in the corner was the *Kamen Rider* helmet she had taken from the school's drama club. Shirou debated whether or not to return it when he heard a voice from behind him.

"The *Shonen* manga I understand," Assassin commented, leafing through a discarded book. "But why would a cross-country runner be interested in *cars*? "

Shirou whirled about, and sure enough, there was the Servant Assassin. He had thought that Assassin, having lost his Master twice over, would have vanished from lack of Prana. But given that both of those Masters had held Chaos Emeralds briefly, 'lack of Mana' was obviously going to take longer than expected.

"I assume Saber isn't with you?" Assassin asked pleasantly, "If she were, she would have sensed my presence and come here."

This was bad. Shirou knew he didn't stand a chance against a swordsman who could fight equally with Saber. Then again, if Assassin had come with terminal intentions, he wouldn't have revealed himself the way he did. Unless he wanted to be polite and thought murdering someone while they were self-aware of it to be more honorable. Assassin was strange like that.

Sensing Shirou's unease, Assassin said, "Oh, don't worry, Master Emiya, I am not here for battle. I have no Master of my own and no urge to pursue the Grail."

"So why exactly *are* you here?" Shirou asked, still wary.

Assassin leaned against a wall and looked at the ceiling. He said, "Ever since the death of my second Master, I've been using my remaining time to explore and take in this era's wonders. I'll admit, having foreword of it thanks to the Holy Grail spoils it all a bit, but there's a difference between that and experiencing it with your own senses."

"Are you having a good time?" Shirou was a little annoyed at Assassin's intrusion, but a bit curious as well. What did the modern world look like to a samurai?

"Oh, it's been lovely," Assassin replied, smiling cheerfully. "Although..."

"What?"

"I've recently discovered something... *unusual*, " Assassin was no longer smiling as he said this, "Something that does not fit the information provided by the Grail."

This intrigued Shirou. "So, why come talk about this with me?"

"Because, I've heard from a reliable source that you are quite good with machines," Assassin answered, "So...can I count on your help?"

Out on the ocean, the waves churned. The currents of the sea were disrupted, numerous boats were nearly capsized, as a great force caused the water to explode out. It was as if someone had taken a giant rock and thrown it into the Sea of Japan. Or the rock was going in the opposite direction...

On the Egg Saucer, Eggman watched as his robots installed the final component on his Genesis Ray's new power source. He had been a bit concerned when Illya had arrived at the Egg Saucer unconscious, but a quick examination showed that she had simply passed out and was in no serious danger.

For now, at least.

Eggman's stoic expression slowly shifted to manic glee as he watched the needle on the power gauge rise from the "E" (For empty) towards the "M" (For 'Maximum Power'). *Finally, something's going right for once!* His grin faltered when the arrow suddenly stopped at the halfway point. "What the heck?"

"And how are things going, Doctor?" Was how Gilgamesh announced himself as he entered the room.

Eggman tried to shift his scowl into a smile, but it came out looking like a grimace. "Splendid, splendid! Putting that girl in the siphon chamber as well as the Shadow have brought up our energy output by leaps and bounds."

Gilgamesh smirked and sat down on a magnificent throne that appeared to have a solid gold frame work and what seemed like the most comfortable pillow as a cushion.

"Well, that's to be expected," Gilgamesh replied, resting on one arm. "Not only does she have the most active Mage Circuits of all the Masters, but she's also containing the souls of at least half the War's Servants."

And if my theory holds water, we won't even need the rest! Eggman thought greedily.

"Of course, even if she had all of the Servants, we wouldn't be able to manifest the Grail here," Gilgamesh continued, "For that, we still need Fuyuki City's leylines. The Grail's container must be over one of the intersecting leylines in the city."

"Calculating our ETA," Orbot announced from another terminal, "We should be at the city within at least two hours."

"Hey, Mr. King Servant Guy," Cubot called from his station, "Can we go to anywhere in Fuyuki, or is someplace specific?"

Gilgamesh smirked. "I've already given you the *exact* coordinates we need to bring my plan to fruition. If you follow the King's orders exactly as they are issued, our victory is assured."

"And if we fire the Genesis Ray at this exact spot, the reaction will compensate for our limited power?" Orbot asked, pointing to a flashing dot on a map.

"Precisely," Gilgamesh answered, "And when the beam of change strikes, it will spell the end of this corrupt and disgusting world and the birth of a true paradise- something worthy of me."

"I couldn't have said it better myself." Eggman half-purred, half-growled. In truth, while he appreciated Gilgamesh's support, he was quickly getting tired of the so-called King of Heroes' ego. The only thing appealing about this partnership was that it would soon be ending.

Before the banter could go any further, an alarm sounded.

"What was that?" Gilgamesh asked, frowning. "Is something malfunctioning?"

"No, that was a long-range proximity alert," Orbot replied, "It seems that something is approaching us."

"Focus our auto-binocs onto it and transmit the image on our main screen." Eggman ordered.

Orbot did so, and when the display lit up, it showed the ocean's horizon. However, there was a dot in the center of the screen. After a moment, the size of that dot increased, and its shape became more pronounced.

It was the *Tornado* , of course. And standing on the wings was Sonic the Hedgehog. In the back, Tails could be seen piloting, with the second seat of the cockpit awkwardly shared by Amy Rose and

Saber. Knuckles the Echidna was determinedly hanging onto the tail of the plane.

Eggman twirled his mustache. "Ahh, here comes Sonic and his merry band," He picked up the microphone of a ham radio and began issuing orders. "All forces, prepare for battle! All ready and available Badniks are ordered to be deployed to their assigned positions!" Hanging up, he turned to Gilgamesh with an wicked grin. "It's showtime!"

And Gilgamesh smiled just as wickedly.

"Are we there yet?" Amy asked from her tentative position on Saber's lap.

"Does it look we're there yet?" Knuckles growled. He wasn't too happy about being stuck in the back.

"I don't know, it's all cloudy out-"

"Something's coming!" Saber shouted, heading off a potential argument.

That something was in fact a squad of Badniks designed to look like a cross between fighter jets and purple falcons, coming out from the clouds and at the *Tornado* .

Tails yanked at the yoke, and the bi-plane tilted back and went upwards to avoid a collision. As it did, the Condors swung around and tried to match the *Tornado* 's height. Spotting this, both Sonic and Knuckles leapt off of the bi-plane and systematically smashed the attacking robots. Tails pulled the *Tornado* into a somersault and swung under the falling heroes and caught them on the wings. Sonic and Knuckles gave each other a thumbs-up, pleased with their handiwork.

"Not a bad appetizer, huh?" Sonic remarked, and flashed Tails a grin. "Cool flying, bro, as usual!"

"We must be getting close to Eggman's base!" Tails reported, "My radar is picking up a huge object!"

And Saber, with eyes superior to mortal beings, pointed. "You are more right than you know. Look!"

The clouds parted, and the crew of the *Tornado* saw it. The 'huge object' they approached was a gigantic maze of factories and complexes, situated on a massive circle. On each building, Eggman's insignia leered at all who could see them. Even from a distance, they could see hundreds of dots that were robots racing about the workings.

"Hey, Amy!" Sonic called out, "We're here!"

"I can see that, thanks!" Amy responded.

Taking out the Piko Piko Hammer, Amy got out of Saber's lap and positioned herself on the *Tornado* 's tail. In the sky, they could see what seemed to be an endless swarm of flying Badniks en route to intercept them. Tails went into evasive maneuvers, and Saber was surprised to see that he didn't even have to call it out, as Sonic, Knuckles and Amy grabbed hold of the bi-plane to avoid being thrown off. They dodged a slew of missiles, and once Tails righted the *Tornado*, Sonic jumped off and smashed a trio of Nebulas that were closing in. As Tails swung the plane to catch Sonic, Knuckles then jumped off and glided towards an Turtloid. Slugging the driving robot to pieces (releasing some sort of parakeet), Knuckles took the time to stretch as he waited on top the riding robot for the *Tornado* to get closer. Once it was, he slammed his fist down on the riding robot, and glided back to the biplane. He missed the wings, but grabbed hold of the landing gear which he used to climb back on time. Afterwards, he shot Tails a dirty look.

"Sorry, Knux!" Tails called out, "It's hard to keep track of two guys at once!"

A squad of at least twenty Condors began to circle the bi-plane. While Amy managed to smash one or two that got a bit too close with her hammer, Sonic and Knuckles took a more direct approach. They both jumped at the same time and began to smash the surrounding Condors with their Spinball forms. To Saber, it looked like a bunch of seals bouncing balls with their noses before exploding. Unfortunately, they were too far away from the *Tornado* when the two of them ran out of robots, and plummeted downwards.

Amy shrieked, but Saber yelled out, "Tails, fly after Sonic! Leave the plane to me!" and without even giving the fox a chance to respond, grabbed him and flung him at Sonic as hard as she could. She then planted herself into the pilot's seat took hold of the yoke. Her A-Rank Riding Skill kicked in, and Saber directed the *Tornado* towards Knuckles. Briefly stunned by the abruptness of Saber's actions, Tails went into helicopter mode and flew at Sonic, catching his friend by the hand. Once Saber had caught Knuckles, she swung the plane around for Sonic and Tails to hop on.

"This is incredible, Saber!" Tails cried, "When did you learn to fly?"

"My Riding Skill allows me to control anything besides a Divine Beast," Saber explained, "If I can put it between my legs, I can steer it to its utmost ability!"

As Tails took his place back in the pilot's seat, he had this odd vision of Saber sitting on top of a jumbo jet, holding a pair of reins attached to the nose. And judging from Sonic and Knuckles' grins, they were thinking the same thing.

Why does everyone smile like that whenever I explain my Riding Skill? Saber thought, confused.

As they approached the Egg Saucer, Saber stood up. She glared down at the massive structure as Tails swung the plane around. She

could see a large open area where a majority of the Badniks were beginning to gather.

"Archer! Lancer!" Saber called out, "We are getting off here!" And to Sonic she said, "We Servants will draw Eggman's attention while the rest of you infiltrate the fortress to find Illya. Is that an acceptable plan?"

"Just don't get so worked up you explode the whole place up with your magic sword!" Sonic replied, flashing Saber a thumbs-up.

Nodding at Sonic and returning his smile, Saber leapt from the *Tornado*. A moment later, both Archer and Lancer re-materialized and followed after her. Normally, such a jump would have resulted in the jumper plummeting into the ocean depths, the Heroic Spirits soared through the air. Eggman's robots, detecting the higher energy concentrations, turned their attention away from the *Tornado* and towards the Servants, moving to either capture or prevent the Servants from reaching the Egg Saucer. Naturally, they failed abysmally. Not only did the Servants easily destroy whatever robots that came their way, but they used the force of the Badniks exploding to propel themselves closer to the Egg Saucer. From a distance, it would appear that three streaks of light, red, blue, and gold, were leaping from one explosion to another.

"Look at 'em go," Sonic commented, "I'm almost jealous at how easily they're doing it."

"I'm taking us in, guys!" Tails announced, "Hold on to something and can an eye out!"

Knuckles then pointed, "Incoming!"

Sonic and Knuckles grabbed onto the wings, while Amy hunkered down in the passenger seat. Tails jerked the yoke, and the *Tornado* tilted on its side to avoid a missile that rocketed past it. Eggman's robots may have been focusing on the Servants, but the anti-aircraft guns were of a different mind. Another missile came at it, and then

another. The *Tornado* quickly found itself twisting and turning about in the air to avoid the onslaught of ballistic death.

"You know, I'm starting to feel unwelcome!" Sonic yelled.

"Don't worry, we're almost through!" Tails exclaimed, "I just need a place to land the *Tornado*!"

"There!" Amy cried, pointing. "I see an empty spot at four o'clock!"

"Going down!"

Once they landed on the deck of the Egg Saucer, the Servants found themselves facing an immense crowd of Badniks. Instead of the more esoteric robot designs, the army was made up of Egg Pawn subtypes. Besides the typical Egg Pawns, all armed with either shields, bazookas, or spears, there were the larger units, robots that were almost bigger than Berserker, armed with proportionally-sized hammers. There also Flappers, Egg Pawns that were hovering in the air. Their facial designs did not allow the expression of emotions, so they stared blankly at Saber, Archer and Lancer.

The Heroic Spirits of the Knight Class only regarded their foes for a second. Then, they moved. And as they moved, the robots exploded, one by one, but so quickly that it seemed like one continuous burst. Saber and Lancer were the first into the fray, slashing and stabbing robots as they ran.

For Saber, this was nothing new. She had fought alongside Sonic in defending Fuyuki from Eggman's robots time and again, so the initial thrill of destroying robots had begun to dull. What pushed her through the sheer drive and determination to succeed. To Win! She cleaved through the Egg Pawn horde as they were butter to the hot knife of *Excaliber*. Saber had dispensed with the Invisible Air that normally hide the size and length of her sword; such subtleties would have been wasted on the unthinking machines. A pair of Egg Hammers attempted to sandwich her between their hammers, but

Saber jumped up and delivered a powerful kick that took off one's head, and used the recoil to fly at and decapitate the other.

But while Saber was as stoic as ever, Lancer was the opposite. The thirst for battle that had been suppressed by Kotomine's orders to watch and wait was awakened, and the sheer amount of opponents only served to whet his appetite. He pushed his speed to its absolute maximum, and skewered multiple Egg Pawns in one thrust. They had no hearts for his *Gae Bolge* to target, but Lancer had no need of his Noble Phantasm for them. Some slightly more intelligent Egg Pawns attempted to blast Lancer from a distance, but his Protection From Arrows skill allowed him to effortlessly block and avoid their shots. At one point, Lancer stabbed his spear into the ground and spun around like an Olympic gymnast, swatting robots in a circle before righting himself and resuming his charge.

Archer, meanwhile, fought a different sort of battle. He stayed in the back, and watched as Saber and Lancer swooped in and decimated the robots. The ones on the ground, anyway. His sharp eyes took in the airborne Flappers.

I Am The Bone Of My Sword

The air around Archer shimmered, and multiple swords appeared, floating within his general proximity. Archer took one sword, Projected his bow, and let the sword fly through the air. One Flapper exploded, and the others followed suit. They were replaced by more flying Badniks, but those too were destroyed by Archer's volley of Broken Phantasms. Once the air was looking a bit clearer, Archer moved to shooting out the Egg Pawns that further in, that were trying in vain to shoot Saber and Lancer from a distance with bazookas. It didn't take long for the robots to realize that the torrent destruction were coming from *somewhere*. Archer heard the sound of rockets from behind him and jumped to the side to avoid being blasted. Coming up where a trio of Egg Robos, their guns blazing. Archer fired a slew of swords, destroying them, and took stock of the surroundings.

Those robots snuck up behind him, but they didn't come out from the horde Saber and Lancer are fighting, Archer thought, So where did they come from...?

Then he saw it. A hatch opening up on the deck. Another Egg Robo came out, and was instantly destroyed by a Broken Phantasm. Archer glanced back at the brawl. He looked at the hatch.

Tails found an empty spot on a deck further away from where the Servants landed, and brought the *Tornado* and Team Sonic (& Knuckles!) took off into the Egg Saucer.

"I always feel a little worried whenever we leave the plane unattended," Tails remarked, even after he set the clamp. "What if someone takes it?"

"That only happened once," Sonic assured his little buddy, "And Big said he was sorry about that."

"The only one who's going to be sorry right now is Eggman," Knuckles smacked his fists together. "Here comes the welcome wagon!"

"Another one?" Amy asked, and swung her hammer into an [Badnik], "I thought Saber and the others were keeping Eggman's bots busy."

As they ran across the pathways, jumping over barriers and floating platforms, they came across a railing that seemed to separate those who chose to go forward from those who wanted to go backwards. Sonic was on in a second, followed by the rest of the team. Their momentum carried them forward as they skated along the railing, screech of their heels grinding against the metal filling the air. It was almost so loud that Sonic didn't hear what Tails said at first. Once they had jumped off and flew about seventy feet before landing on a different pathway, Tails repeated himself.

"If there was a terminal, I could find out where Illya's being kept."
Tails said.

Sonic held up his hand signaling that he was about to stop, and did so. They four of them were now standing on a catwalk. Putting his hands over his eyes, he peered around, he could flashing lights and hear soft explosions in the distance. Apparently, the Servants' battle was still going on.

"Well, we're not going to find anything like that out here," Sonic decided, "Let's check the central building!"

They took off running again, and soon jumped off the catwalk and onto a powerline. The metal tubes that moved energy throughout the Egg Saucer were as wide as Eggman's stomach, and the four were able to keep their balance even at high speed. As they ran, a squad of quartet of Snail Blasters were stationed on a smaller pipeline higher up. As they took aim, Amy spotted the Badniks out of the corner of her eye.

"Bogies at nine o'clock!" She exclaimed, "Jump!"

Team Sonic (& Knuckles!) did jump, narrowly avoiding the Snail Blasters' cannonfire. While they were in the air, Sonic launched a Homing Shot and destroyed the Badniks one right after another. Once he was done, he launched another Homing Shot to get back onto the powerline. He soon caught up with the rest of the Team.

"Show off!" Knuckles shouted back at Sonic.

Tails then squinted. "Here come some more!"

A trio of Egg Pawns holding up thick riot shields were up ahead. One held up a sign shaped like Eggman's head with the word "STOP!" written in big red letters.

"I've got this," Knuckles snorted, and took the lead.

Swinging his fists, Knuckles plowed through the Egg Pawns, smashing their shields like basal wood and knocking them off the powerline. One landed relatively intact, only to for its head to be cut off by the stop sign falling down at an angle.

The powerline began to turn away from the central building. As they jumped off, Knuckles saw some Flappers flying in their direction.

"Look who showed up!" He yelled, jerking a thumb.

"Hang on!" Tails cried.

Tails grabbed Sonic and Knuckles' hands, while Amy grabbed hold of their feet. Spinning his tails at maximum speed, Tails slowed their fall just enough that the Flappers just soared beneath them. Tails let go and the team continued on. The road to the central complex was littered with the usual pitfalls, along with mounted laser turrets and flamethrowers.

"We're almost there!" Sonic announced, "Get ready! There's probably a sub-boss waiting for us at the entrance, or something!"

Amy smacked an approaching Egg Pawn. "What kind of robot do you think it will be?"

In his control room, Eggman stared at screen, showing the overview of Egg Saucer's layout. On one section, two glowing dots were zipping about. In another section, another dot was seen running towards the central building of the Egg Saucer. Adjacent to the overview display, there was a smaller display showing a side layout of the Egg Saucer. There was a dot going into the underground sections.

Eggman turned his chair towards the two figures behind him. "All right, boys? Shall we draw straws?"

&Break&

"All right," Rin declared, standing up. "We're moving."

Since returning to the Emiya Property, the ladies had been sitting around the table, drinking tea in silence. So, Rin's declaration had the same effect as would popping a balloon in a library. Sakura and Bazett jumped slightly and looked to the Tohsaka Master

Sakura asked, "What do you want to do mean, *Nee-san*? "

"I mean we're not to just sit here and do nothing!" Rin said fiercely, "We're going to the Ryuudou Temple!"

Bazett caught on. "Absorbing the Leylines intersecting there will help our Servants in their battles." She explained to the confused Sakura.

"It's not normally done because remaining in a public space would make a Master vulnerable to attack," Rin went on, "But since we're the only Masters left, that's not an issue we need to worry about. Where's Shirou? Saber will need more Mana than anyone."

It was at that moment that the women took note of an absence. Namely, Shirou's. They did a quick scan of the house and found no trace of its Master. They also realized that his bicycle was missing.

"Where the heck did he go?" Rin asked, her voice laced with irritation born of worry. "Doesn't he realize what kind of crisis we're in? Fine time to go grocery shopping!"

" *Senpai* was upset at being left behind," Sakura, reaching towards her mouth in concern. " You don't suppose...?"

In a stunning act of mental synchronization, the same exact thought passed through each of their heads. That thought was an image of Shirou, wearing ill-fitting combat fatigues, haphazardly trying fit in with a squad of actual soldiers, as they boarded a helicopter.

"Let's call that agent," Bazett decided, "We might be able to catch him."

They wouldn't be able to catch him. Shirou had no idea where he even was. Assassin had led him on a winding trail of back allies and side roads. In hindsight, he should have told the girls that he was going out, or left a note. He was going to get it when he got back, that was for sure. It would take at least three home cooked meals. Hopefully.

Of course, none of that was in Shirou's head as he looked at Assassin's discovery. It was some kind of high tech platform, with a circle of lights on the top. Attached to it was a small flight of stairs that would help climb on top of it. Alongside the platform was a computer terminal, which were flickering and making beeping sounds. It was like nothing Shirou had seen before.

"Well?" Assassin asked, "Can you figure out what it does?"

Swallowing, Shirou approached the device. He laid his hand on the terminal. " *Trace On* ."

Information flowed into Shirou's mind. It was almost too much. Compared to the robot that attacked Illya's castle, this machine, though much smaller, was far more advance. The sheer enormity of the designs almost overwhelmed Shirou, but the Master refused to buckle under the mental pressure. Through sheer determination, Shirou forced himself to decipher the various patterns and mechanics that made up the machine.

After a moment, he gasped, and fell to his knees. Assassin was quickly at his side.

"Are you well?" The Servant asked, concerned.

"Yeah..." Shirou muttered, shaking his head in an attempt to clear it. "It...this machine...it's some kind of matter transporter. It can teleport things... Eggman built it," As the buzz faded, Shirou stood up to look at the platform. "It's how he's been able to get his forces into the city unnoticed. This... this goes straight to his hideout!"

Assassin looked at the teleporter. If he was saying anything, Shirou couldn't hear it. His head was filling with ideas. Actually, just one idea. As if in a trance, he walked towards the terminal. After all, he knew how it worked...

To be continued

Tiger Dojo:

Taiga: Welcome, one and all, to the Tiger Dojo! I am your instructor, Fujimura Taiga!

Omochao: I'm Omochao. I'll be assisting in this Q/A.

Taiga: Huh!? Wha- where's *Shishou*?

Omochao: Who? I don't know what you are referring to.

Taiga: Ah, um, well, never mind! Let us go to the first question, from Vein Bloodborne: "Will Sonic enter his 'King Arthur' mode or even his Werehog mode?"

Omochao: That is unlikely. Sonic would have to be pulled into the story of King Arthur for the first, and the second requires Sonic to be exposed to a large amount of Dark Gaia. Our next question comes from Kenza. They ask, "What were Lancelot's last thoughts when he saw Sonic together with Saber and Shirou before dying peacefully?"

Taiga: Hmm...Lancelot mistook Sonic for King Arthur because of his Mad Enhancement impeding his judgement. I bet when he saw Sonic with untainted eyes, he was probably happy to see someone who might understand the burden his king once bore.

Omochao: Our last question comes from Shen; "Will Sonic use a sword?" Actually, I have an early sample of an upcoming chapter I've been authorized-

SKRREEEEEE

We interrupt this program for an emergency announcement. A large, unidentified flying object has been sighted approaching Japan. All attempts to communicate with this vessel have failed, and citizens are advised to be ready to evacuate if need be. We now return to our regularly scheduled show.

Taiga: -nd that wraps it up for our session! I will see you at the next practice!

Omochoao: See you later, everyone!

Pride of the Warrior King

Chapter 28: Pride of the Warrior King

Figuring out how the teleporter worked was easy, borderline simplistic. It helped that the actual transport button was big, red, and had " **SEND TO EGG SAUCER** " printed in bright letters. The rest of the controls were about sending emails, surfing the internet, and choosing what music track the operator could listen to.

Actually being teleported was an entirely different matter. There were no words or metaphors that could describe having every molecule instantly disassembled, transmitted at the speed of a high-speed internet connection, and instantly reassembled at a new location. It made Shirou's Mage Circuits, as well as his other, more mundane nerves, tingle.

"Well, that wasn't so bad," Assassin commented, wiping his brow. "For a moment, I thought we weren't going to make it."

Shirou was about to deliver a witty retort, but noticed that the normally unflappable Servant seemed a bit...off. There was a slight hue to his checks, as if he had been jogging hard. "Are you all right?"

"I'm just not used to being outside of the city's leylines, that's all," Assassin assured him, composing himself. "I'll be fine. Besides, you should be more worried about...them."

Shirou whirled about, and saw what looked like some sort of giant, toy pig standing in the corner. The robot's eyes were opened all the way, and its body shook. Clearly Shirou and Assassin's abrupt appearance caught it by surprise. The Ball Hog recovered quickly enough, and fired something out of its belly. Shirou and Assassin jumped aside, and the projectile bounced across the floor, crashing into and destroying the teleporter. Shirou Projected a sledgehammer and slammed it into the Ball Hog, breaking it into pieces. As a little

squirrel scampered out of the wreckage, Shirou gave Assassin a Look for not helping.

"You looked liked you had it taken care of." Assassin said.

Before Shirou could give his witty retorted, the remains of the teleporter gave off a spark, drawing his attention. At first, Shirou thought that maybe the device could be repaired. A *second* explosion, caused by the damaged parts overheating, put a damper on that notion. The teleporter had gone from "Busted but maybe serviceable" to "Just buy another one".

"We're not going back the way we came in," Shirou remarked, and turned towards the door. "We might as well keep going forward. And hope..." *Hope we don't need saving ourselves...*

Well, perhaps to no one's surprise, Agent Stuart had no idea where Shirou was. So, back at the Emiya living room, Rin, Sakura and Bazett tried to determine the young man's whereabouts. Rin called up several independent air and boat services that she could find in the phone book. Sakura used Bazett's cell phone to call their classmates, on the slim chance that Shirou gone to one of them for a visit.

Therefore none of them were prepared for the abrupt entrance of Fujimura Taiga.

"SHIIIROOUUU!" The Tiger of Fuyuki shrieked as she literally broke through the door to the living room. The ladies jumped in surprise, Rin reflexively breaking her phone as she slammed it down on its cradle.

" S-sensei ?" Sakura gasped, trying to control her beating heart. "Is something the matter?"

"Have- Huff -haven't you heard?" Taiga panted, "There's some sort of battleship or whatever heading towards Fuyuki! The military can't

stop it, and an evacuation order was just announced! Do you know where Shirou..."

That was as far as Taiga got, because in the time she was talking, Rin had stood, walked over, and cast a hypnosis spell on her English teacher. Taiga's eyes glazed over, and her posture seemed to become limp.

"Emiya- *kun* already knows, he is already helping other people evacuate," Rin instructed in a clipped tone, "Go help the rest of the neighborhood."

Nodding dully, Taiga walked out with the grace and poise of a wind-up toy. Once she was gone, Sakura and Bazett looked at Rin. Sakura appeared stunned at Rin's decision, while Bazett had a calculating expression on. They both made Rin uncomfortable.

"Don't look at me like that," Rin said, with a stubborn awkwardness. "There's no point in making Taiga more worried than she already is."

"From the sound of things, Eggman is going to attack Fuyuki again," Bazett said, "But why? He already has Illya to power his machines..." She narrowed her eyes as she contacted Lancer telepathically.

Sakura gasped as she made the connection. "But Illya's the Grail as well. And the Grail won't manifest..."

"...Unless the container is at a nexus point for the Fuyuki Leylines!" Rin finished as she came to the same conclusion. "Damn it!" *Shirou, wherever you are, I hope you're safe!*

As he and Assassin continued to explore the inner recesses of Eggman's lab, Shirou began to feel a sense of foreboding. Besides the few robots that had been stationed in the teleporter room, the entire complex was utterly devoid of guards. He guessed that majority of Eggman's forces were outside dealing with both Team

Sonic & the Servants or the military, the former more likely. His unease was not helped by the...less standard functions of certain rooms.

An arcade, a food court, indoor swimming pool... Shirou thought as they checked each door they came across, If I didn't know better, I'd swear this was a hotel!

There were rooms that were more suitable to an evil scientist, of course. There was an observation deck for the assembly line, one for testing larger robots (Along with a popcorn dispenser), and a room to observe captured specimens. Shirou hoped to find Illya there, but the room was empty.

"Damn it!" Shirou swore, and slammed his fist into the wall.

Boom

Stunned, Shirou looked at his fist with wonder.

"That sounded like it came from another room." Assassin pointed out helpfully.

More blasts were heard, making it easy to figure out which door they were coming from. As they entered, Shirou heard something like a crazed giggling. The room looked very much like an indoor shooting range, with torn and beaten dolls made in the likeness of Sonic, Tails, and Knuckles. Standing before these plush effigies a person Shirou never expected to see.

"Shinji?!" Shirou exclaimed before he could stop himself.

" I know what to do!" Shinji declared as he was brought into the lab.

" What do you mean by that?" Eggman asked, "You said you had important information, so Let's have it."

" Not so fast," Shinji retorted, "It's time you held up your end if our bargain."

Eggman cocked his head. "How's that?"

"I want to be a mage," Shinji demanded. He knew he was taking a risk, that he was more powerless in the Egg Saucers than he had ever been in the Matou household, but he had to press what little advantage he held. "You promised me that your ray gun thing can give me active Mage Circuits, so you won't get anything until that happens!"

Eggman stroked his mustache in thought. He had said that, and the math seemed sound enough to try. However, he wasn't sure if the power they drained from the Shadow was enough to affect anything larger than that houseplant. Then again, Shinji seemed really confident about what he knew, and Eggman wanted someone other than Gilgamesh to talk to...

Taking out a coin, Eggman gave it a flip, caught it, checked which side it landed on, and then threw his hands up in the air. "Fine, fine," He said, "Let's get this over with. But this better be good!"

On their way down to the Genesis Ray prototype's testing room, Shinji told Eggman, "Berserker is dead. That albino loli Master doesn't have any other protection. And all of them, she and the remaining Masters, are planning some kind of ridiculous picnic tomorrow at her castle."

Eggman's mustache perked as he grinned. "That is good!"

Inside the demo room, Eggman had his robots get ready. Orbot, who had a better understanding of Magecraft thanks to reviewing the Matou grimoires, typed the specifications into the Ray's settings. As he did, Cubot cleared up the target point, putting the table and a potted plant off into the corner.

As the Ray's cannon powered up, Shinji began to feel apprehensive. "Erm, will this hurt?"

Eggman and Orbot exchanged looks. Orbot shrugged. Looking back at Shinji, Eggman said, "We'll be fine." And threw the switch.

At Shirou's exclamation, Shinji whirled about. His shocked expression grew even more so when he saw who it was. Shirou, while stunned and confused about Shinji's presence, began to grow angry. His first instinct would have been to assume that Shinji had been taken prisoner, but if that was so, why wasn't Shinji locked up?

"Emiya!" Shinji gasped. He seemed rather tired. "Wha- how did you get here?"

"That's my line." Shirou said evenly. He wasn't sure why, but he had some sneaking suspicion that Shinji had done something he wouldn't be proud of. Far off somewhere in the Egg Saucers inner workings, Archer found himself experiencing get déjà vu.

It was a tense standoff in the shooting gallery. Shirou and Shinji stared each other down. Off to the side, Assassin looked over at the targets. Even now, an Egg Pawn was replacing the destroyed dolls with in-tact versions.

Shirou spoke first. "Eggman kidnapped Illya. During the party. The one you didn't want to come to, but we told you all about."

Shinji gritted his teeth, but kept trying to appear friendly. "Oh? That... that's what happened to me, as well! I'm a prisoner too."

"So why aren't you in a jail?" Shirou asked dangerously. His mind was forming connections, and they were filling him with anger.

"Oh, I escaped-"

"I doubt that." Shirou knew Shinji, and a daring escape required more than whatever his classmate was capable of.

"Oh, are you?" Suddenly, Shinji seemed less nervous, and more angry. "Well, do you doubt...This?!"

Shinji thrust his palm forward. There was a crackling noise, and a spark of black lightning leapt from his hand and into Shirou's chest. Shirou buckled and fell onto one knee. Off to the side, Assassin looked from the pile of robot parts and the little sparrow that came out.

Shirou gasped, and forced himself to stand. The sparks didn't hurt much, but they did disrupt the feeling in his body. He tried to process the pain, push it out of his body, but his anger was making it hard to concentrate. He knew that Shinji shouldn't have active Mage Circuits from Rin, and there was only one way for that to change.

"Hurts, doesn't it?!" Shinji crowed, "Not being the only one with powers anymore must be such a blow! And that was just a taste of what I can do now!"

"Ugh...you let Eggman modify you with his Genesis Ray," Shirou guessed, standing up. "And in exchange, you traded him intel on what we would be doing!"

"COR-RECT! Give the man a prize!" Shinji whooped with malicious glee. He sent out more sparks, but Shirou was ready and jumped aside. "I was hoping to have the Holy Grail grant me powers, but you and that stupid Hedgehog ruined it!"

"What are you talking about?" Shirou asked, "We didn't do anything to you!"

"I lost control of Rider because of your fighting at the harbor!" Shinji yelled back, "As far as I'm concerned, you owe me this!"

"You betrayed us, you betrayed your entire country, the entire world..." Shirou growled, getting angrier. "...All because of your defecies as a Master!?"

"SHUT UP!" Shinja shrieked. Sweat was pouring from his brow, and his left eyebrow was twitching as he spoke. "You've always looked

down on me! Always acting like your useless powers made you a hero!"

He's not used to using his new mage circuits, Shirou realized, And judging from those ruined targets, he used up most of his energy as is...

Indeed, as he was ranting, the sparks pouring from Shinji's hands suddnly gave out. Shinji bent over, panting heavily as exhaustion took over. Spotting his chance, Shirou leapt forward and slammed his fist into Shinji's jaw, sending the blue-haired teen flying. Shinji went into a tumble before crashing into the corner of the room. His expression was utterly ridiculous to look at, with his mouth agape and his eyes bugged out and unfocused. He was completely unconcious.

"Your grandfather was the same," Shirou said at his ex-friend.
"Causing people pain just to feel good."

On the Egg Saucer's exterior, Team Sonic & Knuckles were approaching the entrance to the center building of the complex. As they got closer, they noticed that the area had golden Power Rings scattered about here and there. They snatched the Rings up as quickly as they could, while trying not to diverge from their path.

"How many do you have so far, Sonic?" Tails asked.

"About twenty," Sonic replied, "I think I can see more Rings in the distance, too."

"Should we go after them?" Amy asked, "We could all the Rings we can get," She then saw a glow from over her shoulders, " *Especialy now!* "

Team Sonic & Knuckles, as one, dropped to the floor and just narrowly avoided being impaled by the Caladbolg, Dainsleif, Duranda, and Gram as shot at them from behind. The ancient

swords obliterated the gates to the central building, as well as the Egg Pawn acting as security check-in.

"Aww, not the toll booth unit!" Cubot groaned. He and Orbot were watching the action from the main control room. "He owed me money!"

Getting up, Team Sonic & Knuckles turned about and saw none other than Gilgamesh. The King of Heroes' arrogant smirk seemed even more malevolent than before, as he looked down at the actual heroes.

"No, stay where you are," Gilgamesh said, "Prostrate enough, and I may forgive the many crimes you have committed."

"Nah, not our style," Sonic replied, "But I'm surprised a big shot like you would team up with the Eggster."

"Your nemesis is immensely flawed, but his skills are what I need to cleanse this dirty world," Gilgamesh stated, "So I will reward the work he has done for me by removing *you*. "

The Gate of Babylon opened again, sending out another ancient weapon speeding at Sonic. Sonic darted to the left to avoid it, and then began to run around as Gilgamesh fired more Noble Phantasms at him. Rather than just play on the defensive, Sonic increased his speed and closed in on Gilgamesh. But instead of attacking him head-on, Sonic grabbed the end of the Archer's cape. He then zipped around Gilgamesh, wrapping his head in his own mantle.

"You guys go!" Sonic ordered, "I'll keep Goldy here preoccupied!"

Gilgamesh let out a muffled, irate scream, and Tails, Knuckles and Amy ran into the building. Before disappearing into the darkness, Amy looked over her shoulder one last time. Meanwhile, Gilgamesh

finally unwrapped himself from his cape. He would have done it sooner, but he wanted to take care not to rip or tear the exquisite stitching and craftsmanship. But once he was free, he gave Sonic a withering glare. It was the kind of disdainful expression you would give a roach that's been skittering over the floor for too long. He then put his hand through his hair, returning it to its original spiky appearance.

"Nice 'do," Sonic commented, "But y'know, I think I pull the spikey look better."

"I beg to disagree."

Behind Gilgamesh, several Gates of Babylon opened. The heads of many ancient swords, spears, and axes could be seen poking out. Then, they fired. Sonic zipped to the right, then the left, zigging and zagging to avoid certain death. Each weapon that failed to hit put a moderately-sized crater in the deck. Sonic tried to circle around Gilgamesh so as to take his back, but the Servant wasn't taking any chances. Gilgamesh seemed to be able to follow Sonic's movements with his eyes, and always made sure that there was a Gate of Babylon pointing directly at the Hedgehog.

On second, maybe I should have had Knuckles stay and help! Sonic thought, But if Gilgamesh is here, what happened with Saber and the others...?

Back at the main deck of the Egg Saucer, Saber and Lancer were almost done clearing out the Egg Pawn army. Although there were still a considerable amount of robots crawling around, their numbers significantly less than before.

I can actually see the floor, now, Saber thought as she bisected an Egg Hammer from the head down, and I can also see that we're missing someone. "Lancer!" She called out, "Have you seen Archer?"

"No!" Lancer's voice called out from the remains of a Flapper while he skewered three Egg Pawns. "He probably slinked off to do his own thing! What does it matter? This is a piece of cake!"

Yes, it was easy, and that set Saber's nerves on end. She knew that Gilgamesh was lurking around the Egg Saucer somewhere, but so far he had not revealed himself. Was he waiting for the Badniks to wear the two of them out? Or had Archer found Gilgamesh was challenging him on his own? Either were possible. Gilgamesh, for all of his cocky demeanor, was more tactful and pragmatic than Saber wanted to admit. Archer...she didn't understand Archer. He joined Caster at the drop of a hat, but then rejoined the group just as quickly. It was hard to tell what direction he was going in.

Going... Saber felt a groan as she quickly figured it out. "Of course he went ahead! He's as bad as Shirou! Lancer! We're moving forward!"

Whatever reply Lancer had was cut off as *something* landed onto the battlefield. Egg Pawns were blasted out of the way as what seemed to be a glowing ball of energy hurtled towards the two Servants. Saber moved to intercept the object, but Lancer was faster. His spear and the sphere met with a crack of force that blew away the scrap metal. Lancer and the ball leapt away, and the energy faded to show their attacker's true form.

"Metal Sonic!" Sonic cried when Sakura told them what happened to Illya.

"What?" Rin asked, "What is that? A robot that looks like Sonic?"

"Exactly," Tails nodded, "He's one of Eggman's most dangerous weapons. He's just as fast as Sonic, but nowhere as nice."

"And he kidnapped Illya," Shirou's fist shook in rage. It was an emotion they were all feeling, fury at being played so easily.

"I'm...I'm sorry." Sakura whispered, covering her eyes in shame.

" Don't worry about it," Knuckles told her, "If Eggman's letting Metal out, it just means he's getting serious. We should, too."

Lancer gaped at the robot. " *That's Metal Sonic? It just looks like someone put Sonic's head on a jet engine!*"

As it happened, the jet engine part of Metal Sonic powered up, and the duplicate charged at Lancer. Lancer spun his spear about to impale Metal, but before they could meet, Metal Sonic shot upwards, going into a spin before plummeting down onto the spearman. Lancer back away and Metal Sonic ended up tearing that part of the deck into pieces. Metal didn't stick to the crater for long, and in a second was already rocketing at Lancer, who had begun darting to the left while setting up a series of Runes. But rather than charging into them, Metal Sonic blasted up into the air to glare down at the Servants.

"Saber! Go on by yourself!" Lancer called to his fellow Servant, "I'll catch up as soon as I'm done with this discount action figure!"

Metal Sonic's eyes flashed, clearly displeased with Lancer's words. Surrounding himself with a forcefield, the robot blasted down at Lancer. Lancer waited until the last minute, then shifted out of the way so that Metal Sonic narrowly missed him. He then circled around Metal to stab the robot in the back, only for Metal to zoom away and avoid it. Metal then zipped around to attack Lancer, who circled around to block Metal's assault.

Although Saber was tempted to stay and assist Lancer in his fight, she knew it would only insult his warrior spirit. Turning, she began to run towards the central building.

Archer didn't know how long the tunnel he was in would go on. However, he knew that wherever he was going would lead him directly to the center of the Egg Saucer. It was also leading him to a never-ending line of Egg Pawns, Egg Robos, and other miscellaneous robots with an 'Egg' prefix.

I was right, Archer fought as he jogged down the hall. He delivered a kick at a Badnik, smashing it and releasing a sea gull. *This area acts a transport line from the main manufacturing plant to the deck. Following it should lead me to the center of Eggman's operations.*

Archer Projected his bow and fired an arrow that punctured a line of Egg Robos, freeing a rabbit, a cat, and several squirrels. He briefly wondered where they were scampering off to, but chose not to pursue that line of thought. Nature would find a way, after all.

Soon, Archer found himself in a large chamber, a dome-shaped room that was probably as big as the warehouse he had fought Eggman in at the harbor.

Speaking of big yolks... Archer thought, as he glared down at the obstacle between him and the door.

It was another Egg Mobile, similar to the Egg Walker Eggman rode at the Harbor. Only this time, it was standing on four legs, like a cross between a crab and a spider. These were no doubt to handle the weight from its additional armaments; A missile launcher on the back, two robotic arms, one with a spiked club, and the other with a round shield. And in the middle of it was Dr. Eggman, seated firmly in the cockpit like a chick in an egg.

"So, Servant Archer!" Eggman proclaimed, "We meet again! Only this time, I don't see events unfolding as they did before!"

"You certainly enjoy to hear yourself talk," Archer snorted, "So I'll make this simple. Tell me where Illya is and let me pass, or I cut out your tongue."

"Illya? You mean my new battery? Forget it!" Eggman retorted, "The enegy she's outputting is incredible! And it's getting stronger the closer we get to Japan!"

Archer gritted his teeth and let a Broken Phantasm fly from his bow. But before the attack could strike, the Egg Brawler's shield moved in

front to block, spinning to aid in deflecting the Phantasm. Archer was more annoyed than impressed, but then he took a closer look at the shield and club.

Wait a minute...it's been painted over and had a stupid Eggface stamped on, but that looks like the mirror shield Gilgamesh summoned in my time! Archer realized, And that club... It's probably another Noble Phantasm from the Gate of Babylon!

The Egg Brawler fired a slew of missiles at Archer, who darted around them while Projecting the Stone Axe of Herakles. But just as he was swinging it to take out the Egg Brawler's main cockpit, the entire thing swung around so that the club would meet the axe. The air shook from the impact, and both Archer and the Egg Brawler were pushed away from each other by the opposing forces. Once the Egg Brawler corrected its stance, it fired another bunch of missiles at Archer. Instead of dodging, Archer Projected an equal amount of arrows to blast them out of the sky.

"Those armaments on your mech...you didn't make them yourself," Archer said accusingly, "Those are gifts from the 'King of Heroes', aren't they?!"

"Very astute," Eggman retorted as he jerked the yoke and flipped switches on his console. "Since I'm letting him tag along on my project, the least he could do was give something up in return." Eggman chose to not to recollect how smug and annoying Gilgamesh had been when he did so. The Archer Servant had made it clear that the act wasn't so much considered an equal exchange in goods and services, but a lord bestowing a trifle to his poor worker the tools to do his bidding. It was humiliating, but Eggman

Damn it! His weapons were annoying enough on their own, but now that Gilgamesh's given him an upgrade, this fight could go in either direction! Archer thought as he ducked under the swing of the club. He Projected Kansho and Bakuya and threw them at the Egg Brawler, only for the two to be deflected by the mirror shield. Another burst of missiles was met with a slew of Projected arrows. Archer

Projected his swords again, and willed them into their Overdrive states. But Eggman just laughed and sent the Egg Brawler into a spin, extending his arms out like fans with shooting his back-launcher again, this time grenades. Archer weaved in and out of the bombs as they exploded, feeling the heat of the blasts but never being burnt.

I can't waste my time playing around with this cracked madman, Archer thought, striking the Egg Brawler's body with Kansho, before jumping away to avoid being cut by the shield. *I'm going to end this...now!*

Once he was a fair distance from the Egg Brawler, Archer despelled his swords and relaxed his stance. Closing his eyes, he focused on an image in his mind and began to speak. But as he did, his voice carried an ominous undertone.

" I Am The Bone Of My Sword "

Eggman raised an eyebrow. "What? What was that?"

Archer continued to speak. *" Steel Is My Breath And Fire Is My Blood "*

"Is...is that supposed to be directed at me?" Eggman asked, confused.

" I Have Created Over A Thousand Blades. " As Archer spoke, the air began to shimmer.

"All right, this is getting weird," Eggman decided, and pushed a button. "Get a load of this!"

" Unknown To Death, " Archer was already on the other side of the room when the missiles struck his previous position. *" Nor Known To Life. "*

Eggman's console beeped frantically, and the doctor gasped as the empty bay they were in somehow transformed into a desolate wasteland.

" Have Withstood Pain To Create Many Weapons ."

The wasteland's sky was filled with giant, rusty, turning gears.

" Yet Those Hands Will Never Hold Anything. "

And into the ground, hundreds of swords appeared, like the markers for countless warriors' graves.

" So As I Pray- " Archer took one sword, and pointed directly at the Egg Brawler. *" -Unlimited Blade Works. "*

Eggman gaped at the changed surroundings. "Did- did you just create a Special Zone!?"

Archer didn't respond. Instead, he grabbed the nearest sword and flung it directly at the Egg Brawler. The shield arm moved to block it, but in the time it took for the throw sword to collide with anything, Archer was already on the move, circling around the mech as he threw more swords. The Egg Brawler spun to try and keep track of Archer, but as it did, the swords seemed to unearth themselves, as if pulled out by invisible hands. These swords would then fly at the Egg Brawler, dissipating on impact, but still causing considerable damage to the vehicle. As this happened, Eggman tried to fire missiles at Archer, on for more swords to shoot the ballistics out of the air.

Eggman came to our universe hoping to exploit our magecraft for his own twisted designs, Archer thought, But the only reason he lasted this long was because he was fighting soft-hearted heroes like Sonic and Shirou, and in public where we couldn't use our full powers.

Archer continued to run, and fall back to slide as the club swung at him. As he was moving, he threw another sword, this one aimed at

the mechanical arm's joint. Sparks began to fly as the weapon connected.

I went easy on him last time because I didn't want Rin to get caught in the crossfire, and I wanted to conserve my Mana for the rest of the War, Archer mused, This time...this time I can cut loose and keep this maniac from hurting anyone else!

Archer threw a sword that struck the Egg Brawler's cockpit. While annoyed that he missed Eggman, the satisfying sparks and explosions that began to erupt were more than an equal trade off. He watched as Eggman vehicle self-destructed as the damage from Archer's relentless assault took their toll. Archer felt the urge to Project a pair of sunglasses, but instead he covered his eyes to shield them from the glare of the final, greatest explosion. As the glare faded, Archer felt something bump into his feet.

It was Eggman's head. Only instead of blood, was falling out were nuts, bolts, and wiring.

Archer looked back at the wreckage, and saw a little bird flying out from it. After a moment, a more comical version of Eggman's head popped out on a spring, like the world's most annoying jack-in-the-box.

" *Ho-ho! Nice try!* " The Egg-on-a-spring gloated over and over in a poorly recorded voice.

Archer groaned and dispelled the Unlimited Blade Works. He couldn't believe that he wasted his trump card on a decoy. What a waste! As he ran out the room's exit, he wondered what exactly else Eggman had set up...especially if he was given access to the Gate of Babylon.

"Ho-kay!" Tails yelled as the Miles Electric gave him a reading. All around him were the broken pieces of destroyed Badniks, with Knuckles and Amy watching his progress.

"You know where she is?" Knuckles asked, casually kicking the head of an Egg Pawn away.

"Yup," Tails memorized the data readout, which changed into a layout of the Egg Saucer's inner sanctum. "We've gotta go down," Tails put away his handheld and gestured. "Follow me!"

With Tails taking the lead, the rest of Team Sonic & Knuckles continued their trek into the Egg Saucer's interior. Their progress was complicated not just by the usual onslaught of Badniks, but other obstacles Eggman had seen fit to put in their way.

There were conveyor belts that moved people backwards, forcing the three of them to move through the air. It wasn't a problem for Tails and Knuckles, but Amy, lacking an additional tail for coptering or the kind of quills that for gliding, wasn't so fortunate. So, she compensated by using her hammer to launch herself forward by slamming it on the belt. Once they were through, they came upon an elevator shaft- only no elevator. While the smart option would have been for Tails to slowly lower his friends, what they actually did was just dive down. Thankfully, their descent was slowed by Flappers that were using the shaft to ascend, and the collision not only destroyed a few more of Eggman's robots, but also allowed them to safely land at the bottom. Once there, they encountered a series of incomplete pathways, pits with spikes at the bottom, and mounted turrets that shot lasers.

After navigating through these dangers, the trio came into a large, seemingly empty room. "Seemingly" being the operative word, as all three of them had more than enough experience with Eggman's bases to know that an unused room was anything but.

Amy took a quick look around. "So, what do you think Eggman put in here?"

Tails was busy double-checking his Miles Electric. "I don't know. But we're getting close to where Illya is being held, so we're on the right track."

Knuckles then pointed. "There!"

A trap door had opened up in the middle of the floor, and they could the tell-tale grind and wind of an elevator lifting up. But before they could see what was being raised, Team Sonic & Knuckles heard the bang of a gun being fired. Out from the hole a missile flew, going up, into a curve, and then coming down at where the trio stood. The three dove for cover, thankfully avoiding the ballistic as it exploded onto the ground.

The figure that rose into the room was man-shaped, much like Sir Pfuzzy-Logik. *Unlike* Sir Pfuzzy-Logik, this robot was built with a more imposing frame, with long spikes on its shoulders and in two lines down its chest, like a vest. It didn't hold any weapons in its hands, but its head was built a manner reminiscent of some sort of primeval lizard. A trail of smoke from the hole where the mouth should be explained where the missile came from.

E-9023: "Dragon Breath"

"Looks like we've got a tough customer," Knuckles said, and smacked his fist into his palm. "Okay, you two go ahead! I can take him."

"Ohhh, no! We are not splitting up again!" Amy protested, "I'm tired of always being separated!"

"Right," Tails agreed, putting away the ME. "It's just another one of Eggman's robots, not a magic ghost like Gilgamesh. It shouldn't be too hard if we work together!"

In any case, Dragon Breath wasn't going to wait for them to wrap up their discussion. The robot charged at Tails, its fist pulled back. It swung its arm in a mighty punch, but Tails used a Spin Dash to rush out of it's way. And from behind, Amy leapt at Dragon Breath and slammed her hammer into its back. Dragon Breath didn't seem to be affected from the blow, but it turned around and glared down at Amy. The pink hedgehog grinned sheepishly, and then bolted as Dragon

Breath tried to squash her beneath its left foot. The floor shook as the robot stomped after Amy, but it was so focused on Sonic's self-proclaimed girlfriend that it didn't see Tails slam into its head as a Spinball. Dragon Breath's head spun about to fire a missile from its mouth, forcing the fox to retreat. While the robot's attention was drawn, Knuckles leapt up and delivered three powerful punches directly to Dragon Breath's chest. Dragon Breath stumbled back a step, but clapped its hands around Knuckles, almost crushing him. The Echidna pushed back with his arms and legs, refusing to let himself be squashed. While Dragon Breath was focused on changing Knuckles' form from three-dimensional to two, Tails had picked up Amy and was lifting her up into the air. Once he was high enough, Tails swung around and threw Amy at the back of Dragon Breath's head. As Dragon Breath stumbled from the blow, Knuckles freed himself and gave the robot an uppercut which sent him falling onto his back. And Amy.

"Wah!" The pink hedgehog shrieked as she dove out of the way.
"Watch out!"

Amy recovered quickly, but so did Dragon Breath. The robot began to stomp around the room again, trying and failing to squash one of the three. When it became apparent that Tails, Knuckles, and Amy were too slippery to catch underfoot, Dragon Breath resorted to firing missiles at them. Even as the sound of explosions echoed off of the walls, the heroes were able to evade the ballistics.

"Jeez, how can Eggman stuff so many missiles into one robot?"
Knuckles groused as he leapfrogged over one shell.

Of course, with their 3-on-1 advantage, it was easy for the Team to attack Dragon Breath, slamming into its back while the robot was trying to attack someone else. At one point, as Knuckles was tackling Dragon Breath in the chest, Tails threw Amy at the back of its head. Instead of just hitting it, Amy smacked the head with a sideways. A bolt came loose, causing the head to spin around out of control. As it did, missiles began to launch out of the mouth erratically. Thankfully,

the three were able to avoid the missiles by hiding directly on Dragon Breath's feet.

"Looks like we've got him on the ropes," Tails said, "Let's get him at once!"

Running a small distance to build up momentum, Tails, Knuckles, and Amy rammed into Dragon Breath from three different directions. Dragon Breath stopped firing missiles, and strange, crackling, crunching noises began to emanate from its chest. Smoke poured out of its mouth, before the robot exploded.

"Pretty weird that Eggman's robots blow up if you hit them enough times." Amy commented.

Dammit! Why won't this thing let me hit him! Lancer thought as Metal Sonic rocketed away from yet another jab.

The Servant and robot had been fighting each other at a breakneck pace, running and flying around each other at speeds that created gusts in their wake. While this had the side effect of wrecking several buildings around the Egg Saucer, Lancer didn't want to let the battle drag out any longer than he had to. Gilgamesh was still out there, and Lancer didn't want to spend his Mana in yet another game of cat-and-mouse. While Bazett could provide more Prana than Kotomine could, he didn't want to drain her in a spat with Sonic's evil twin.

Metal Sonic didn't seem to share Lancer's irritation. He just kept flying around, trying to find an opening and rushing at Lancer when he thought he found one. Luckily, Lancer's reactions were fast enough to either block or dodge Metal's attacks. But through it all, Metal gave no indication of being bothered by the standoff. Granted, the lack of mouth made it hard to determine Metal's emotions, but that only served to annoy Lancer more.

I think it's high-time I put an end to this, Lancer thought, This thing doesn't look like it's carrying any of those Rings, so... " Gae Bolg! "

Lancer shot at Metal Sonic. But even though he was moving at speeds that would be impossible for a lesser man, before he had even completed the first syllable, a green sphere appeared and surrounded Metal Sonic's body, formed from energy projected by the robot. When Lancer's spear collided with forcefield, causing sparks to fly as magic and science collided in the air. Metal Sonic then rocketed away as Lancer fell back onto the ground, landing on his feet.

What the Hell! Why didn't it work!? Lancer thought as he resumed running, *I'm way stronger now that Bazett's my Master, I should have gone straight for his heart-* Lancer slapped his forehead in disgust. *It's a robot. It doesn't have a heart! Doy!*

As Lancer chased at Metal Sonic, the durasteel doppleganger shut off his forcefield and likewise rocketed towards Lancer. Once he was close enough, Metal went into a spin to deliver a kick. Lancer spun on his heels to avoid, and swung his spear down to take off the robot's head. Metal brought up his hands and caught the attack, and after a moment of struggle pushed the Servant away, before rocking out of reach. But while his body was focused on the battle, the mind was elsewhere.

SUBJECT: LANCER__

"GAE BOLG" DATA HAS BEEN COPIED__

**ANALYSIS: TIME-MANIPULATION ABILITY HAS A 75%
COMPATABILITY WITH CHAOS CONTROL__**

**WARNING: ESTIMATED ENERGY OUTPUT REQUIREMENTS
EXCEED CURRENT PARAMETERS__**

CALCULATING ALTERNATIVE MEASURES__

WARNING!

SUBJECT: SABER IS APPROACHING EGG TOWER_

NEW OBJECTIVE: INTERCEPT_

Without another word, Metal Sonic suddenly turned about and rocketed off. Lancer, who had been preparing for yet another clash, stared uncomprehendingly.

"What..." Lancer blinked, "Hey! Get back here, we weren't done yet!" Lancer was about to race after Metal Sonic when a loud crash caught his attention. His Protection From Arrows Skill kicked in as his arm, heedless of his own conscious thoughts, spun his spear about to deflect what seemed to be a saw sword coated in a golden aura that had come flying out of sight from the left. Looking, Lancer saw what seemed to be steady blue dot constantly bouncing between a group of flickering yellow lights. The ground underneath the blue dot exploding, sending it flying back towards Lancer, revealing himself to be Sonic as he bounced onto his feet.

"Great, took me forever to get those Rings..." Sonic groaned, and then noticed Lancer's presence. "What are you doing here?"

"I was dealing with a friend of yours," Lancer replied, "But it looks like- *Look out!* "

A barrage of flying, sacred weapons were already on their way. While Lancer dodged and blocked them all without breaking his stance, Sonic dove into a roll that took out and around the area. As he did, who should come before the two but Gilgamesh? The gold-clad Servant had his eyes fixated on Lancer as he strode forward.

"Well, the Hound," Gilgamesh stated, "You seem to be in higher spirits since your leash was taken by that woman. Have you come to resume your service to me? If you beg enough, I might-"

Sonic rammed into Gilgamesh's side, and the Archer nearly fell over. But a proud king did not bend his knee so easily, and Gilgamesh recovered and grabbed Sonic by the throat before the Hedgehog could get away.

"I am *tired*- "Gilgamesh hissed, "-of being interrupted!"

Before Gilgamesh could do anything to Sonic, Lancer invoked " *Gae Bolg!* " and was about to pierce the King of Heroes' heart. But Gilgamesh had already reached into the Gate of Babylon and pulled out another sword to parry Lancer's spear. But, getting all-too-used to people blocking his allegedly unstoppable attack, Lancer was already making his next move. He swung around his spear and kicked at Gilgamesh's other arm, causing the king to release Sonic. The two quickly moved away to avoid another onslaught from the Gate of Babylon.

"You were saying something about Rings?" Lancer asked Sonic.

"I need fifty so I can use the Chaos Emeralds," Sonic said, "I've been spotting them around here, but I don't have time to play scavenger hunt."

"In that case..." Lancer swung around, and caught Sonic's belly with the handle of his spear. The Hedgehog went flying into the air, disappearing between another set of buildings. Once Sonic was out sight, Lancer turned back to Gilgamesh, who had watched the event with a look of bemusement.

"Were you trying to help, acting like that?" Gilgamesh asked, as the heads of more weapons slowly appeared from the Gate of Babylon. "Or did you not want him to see you die so pitifully?"

Lancer laughed. "Yeah, right! That guy's a pain in the neck, always making a joke of a decent fight...I got him out of the way of what may be the best fight of my life!" *Bazett, don't worry about me...this is what I've always wanted...a battle with no limits!*

As the Gate of Babylon released its contents, Lancer charged.

Bazett stopped. She and the sisters were on their way to Mt Ryuudou. All around them, the city was in chaos. Throngs of people were fleeing as fast as their legs could carry them. The city's police, firemen, and other officials were doing their best to keep things manageable, but even so, one out of ten got stepped on. Unaware of Bazett, Rin and Sakura continued on, before Sakura suddenly went down on one knee.

"Are you all right?" Rin asked, and then reconsidered. "You're not fully recovered!"

"I'm fine, *Nee-san* , I just tripped." Sakura replied, getting up.

Rin stared at her sister, unconvinced. "Are you sure?"

"I'm through the worst of it, *Nee-san* ." Rin assured, steadying herself. "Besides, it belonged to Saber first..."

Saber was almost to the central building when she heard the screech of a jet from above her. She dove to the side, just in time to avoid Metal Sonic as he slammed down. The force of his landing created a small imprint onto the floor.

Saber did not bother to wonder what happened to Lancer. She knew this creation was as fast Sonic, and did not want spend precious milliseconds pondering on unimportant matters. If Lancer was still alive, he would come. If not, she would fight alone. That was all to be said.

Saber charged, swinging her sword in a chop that would have beheaded a lesser opponent. Metal Sonic rocketed up and away from the blade, but he was only a foot in the air when he swung his leg around to kick at Saber's head. Saber brought up the hilt to block the kick, and the two separated. Metal Sonic formed his forcefield

and charged at Saber, who chopped her sword at him to create a mighty shriek as the two forces collided. The two were thrown back from each other, and upon recovering, they glared.

"So, you aren't going to let me into that building?" Saber asked.

Metal Sonic nodded. He crossed his arms in a way that reminded Saber of a moody teenager.

"Is that where Illya is?" Saber asked.

Metal nodded.

"That is all I needed to hear!" Saber declared, and held out her hand. "*Avalon!*" And in a flash, in her hand, appeared her sheath.

Metal Sonic's jets powered to life, and he blasted at the Servant.

Sonic was no stranger to the idea of a 'strategic retreat'. In fact, a majority of his battles involved keeping a good distance away from his opponents while preparing to strike back. Therefore, he was able to keep his head clear and cool as he raced around the Egg Saucers various structures as Gilgamesh took potshots with the Gate of Babylon.

"What's the matter, Sonic?" Gilgamesh crowed as Sonic narrowly avoided being skewered by another ancient sword. "I thought those magic Rings of yours protected you from Noble Phantasm? Or is the quality of my treasures far greater than that of the Hounds?"

Sure wish he'd shut up, Sonic thought as he slid underneath an archway. It exploded spectacularly thanks to the Gate of Babylon. *Once I hit fifty, he'll be singing a different tune.*

Truthfully, Sonic knew his Power Rings would offer ample protection from Gilgamesh 's weapons. The problem was, Sonic only had 31 Rings so far, and the so-called King of Heroes seemed to have a

never-ending supply of magic swords, Spears, and other sacred weapons. Even if his Ring collection shielded him from one hit, the next ten would obliterate him.

As he ran, Sonic spotted a gleam of gold in the distance. Rings! Doing some parkour off a few walls, Sonic leapt up and snagged about five Power Rings. Up in the air, Sonic heard the talented rush of air that did a Homing Shot to parkour of another wall, narrowly avoiding another blitz of swords. Glancing over his shoulder, Sonic saw that Gilgamesh was chasing on what like some sort of hi-tech flying vehicle, and it didn't look like anything Dr. Eggman could build. It was a gold craft with glowing green wings, and where the cockpit should've been, Gilgamesh sat in a throne. Sonic briefly wondered what culture in ancient times had spaceship technology before he darted to the side to avoid yet more 'Gate-Shots'.

Maybe aliens built the pyramids and left one of the shop's for Golden Boy to claim. Sonic thought.

"What do you think of my vessel, the *Vimana* ?" Gilgamesh called out, "You should honored I have graced you by bringing it out. In the last War, that vile Berserker had the nerve to attack it with a plane from Japanese air force."

Sonic ignored Gilgamesh, leaping into the air at a line of Rings. Just as Gilgamesh fired another Salvo from the Gate of Babylon, Sonic did a Homing Shot at the Rings. His energy connected to the Rings, carrying him across the line. Sonic then fell towards a horizontal flagpole (Bearing Eggman's classic smirk), grabbing ahold of the bar. After swinging around faster than an Olympic gymnast, Sonic let go and his momentum carried him towards the nearest wall, which he began running along at maximum speed. Far behind, the flagpole exploded as another one of Gate of Babylon's treasures struck it. As Sonic ran along the wall, he chanced to left and saw roads and fields- the Egg Saucers was already in Japanese airspace. Tilting his head back, Sonic saw the *Vimana* hovering above him. It was keeping the pace, and Sonic see the Gate of Babylon opening AR it's underbelly. Over the years, Sonic had developed a sixth sense

when it came to projectile weapons, and it was telling him he had to shift gears- *now!*

Sonic leapt, and the explosion from the Gate of Babylon's shots pushed towards a rail. Catching the rail with his hand, Sonic swung himself up and began to grind along. He could hear the *Vimana* fly after him, and once he came upon an adjacent rail, hopped onto it to avoid another barrage of ancient weapons. As he slid along the metal, Sonic came along another group of Rings. Before he could grab them, the Gate of Babylon opened again, and Sonic had to jump and Homing Shot away from the rail to avoid being skewered by what looked like a shiner version of Lancer's spear.

Sonic landed back onto a catwalk and took off. He heard the a rush of jets and saw the *Vimana* pass overhead. Now directly in front of him, the *Vimana* turned about to face Sonic directly. The Gate of Babylon opened, sending yet more barrage of sacred weapons hurtling towards Sonic. The Hedgehog easily sidestepped around them, shifting his position to keep out of the Gates line of fire.

Same old, same old, Sonic thought, *don't be in front of the death machine when it fires. Wonder why he doesn't make more of those portals-* multiple glowing green holes of light appeared. *One of these days, I'm gonna keep my mouth shut.*

Sonic spent the following thirteen seconds ducking, weaving, and rolling under, around and over a barrage of legendary weapons to avoid certain death. At the fourteenth second, Sonic spotted a turnoff coming up and gladly took it, putting himself away from the hail of death determined to pour on him. Another set of rails came up, and Sonic hopped on to grind. As he slid down the railing, he realized that he could not hear the roar of the *Vimana* anymore. That was unsettling.

Where the heck did he go? Sonic thought, his eyes darting. *No way I lost him that easily...*

Sonic saw a rush of movement out of the corner of his eyes, and jumped just in time to avoid being ensnared by several meters of chain. The air became a web of metal links that Sonic had to twist his body to dodge. Curling up, Sonic launched a Homing Shot through the largest gap in the array of chains towards freedom. Just before he could make it, yet another line of chain appeared, catching Sonic and ensnaring him. Thankfully, Sonic didn't hit the links with spikes, but immediately after his collision, the entire Web rearranged that each of Sonic's limbs had a chain wrapped around him. They pulled his arms and legs out so he looked like a Hedgehog version of the *Vitruvian Man*. A corkscrew laugh filled the air, and Gilgamesh flew the *Vimana* so that it was directly in front of his foe. While still looking down at him, of course.

"And so the rodent's road runs out," The King of Heroes chortled, "You made an impressive effort in your retreat- Of course you would understand the futility in fighting me. -But when the King decrees that you would die, your own life becomes forfeit."

As Gilgamesh spoke, golden portals began to open all round him. Sonic stopped struggling to watch them. By his count, there were at least ten. And all pointed at him.

"Indeed, when you tried to defy my will, all you've done is increase the measure of your execution," Gilgamesh continued, "I see you have been gathering those golden Rings. Were you hoping that they would defend you from my treasures? But you only need to be struck once before losing them all, don't you?" At those words, the tips of various swords and spears began to appear from within the portals. "I wonder, which of the Gate of Babylon will be your..."

"Fifteen at the pipes, five along the wall..."

Gilgamesh trailed off. Much to added fury, Sonic wasn't even paying attention to him! Instead, the Hedgehog was looking down, his eyes narrowed as he mulled over something.

"Hey! Have you even been listening to me?" Gilgamesh shouted, vexed.

"Huh?" Sonic looked at the Archer. "Yeah, yeah, 'Good is dumb' you're all-powerful, blah blah blah, got it, got it. Sorry, just a little preoccupied. Got more important stuff on my mind."

"You little..." A vein began to throb on Gilgamesh ' s forehead. "I have you captured and am about to execute you! What could possibly be more important than *that*? "

At this, Sonic smirked. "How about fifty Power Rings? And seven Chaos Emeralds?"

Light began to emit from Sonic's body. Around him, the Chaos Emeralds floated out, circling around the Hedgehog in a ring that changed angles at every second. The lights of the glowing jewels seemed to get bigger, as they moved faster and faster. Before long, they had become one continuous stream of color that surrounded Sonic.

FLASH!

The chains broke away. Although they had been forged to contain even the most stubborn and cantankerous of beasts, *Enkidu* was made only for the denizens of the present world. What Sonic had become was far beyond anything the founders of the Heaven's Feel could have expected.

Despite no longer being held by the chains, Sonic remained in the air. His quills did not droop, but stood upright. His fur, his skin, his entire body glowed with a light that, while appeared to be gold to a lesser eye, shined with every color in the universe. His eyes were no longer green as the clear grass, but red, like a sun about to go supernova.

He had become Super Sonic

Gilgamesh was briefly- *very briefly!* -awed by the force of Super Sonic's energy, but this feeling gave way to fury and outrage as he took in Sonic's new appearance.

"...And now you're *copying my look!* " Gilgamesh thundered in outrage.

But Super Sonic just laughed, "Don't flatter yourself. Though, speaking of your look..." In flash, Super Sonic was right in front Gilgamesh, "For a guy from ancient Mesopotamia, you're pretty blond and pale."

Enraged at Sonic's closeness, Gilgamesh opened the Gate of Babylon to obliterate the glowing Hedgehog. Super Sonic was then gone, and the force of his departure pushed the *Vimana* back, nearly causing Gilgamesh to fall out of his throne. As Gilgamesh recovered, he heard a rush of a wind just a split-second before *something* unspeakably fast slammed into his back. This happened again, from a different angle, and yet again, causing the *Vimana* to rock back and forth. Equal parts furious and flabbergasted, Gilgamesh reached into the Gate of Babylon and pulled out a sword and swung it just in time to strike the incoming Super Sonic. As he watched Sonic's form go flying back, Gilgamesh allowed him a nasty smirk. But his glee faded when he saw that instead of falling, Super Sonic went into a spin and flew further back, vanishing from sight.

Where is he going? Gilgamesh thought.

Gilgamesh got his answer when Super Sonic suddenly dropped down from above with the speed of a meteorite. Rather than hitting Gilgamesh, Sonic struck the end of the *Vimana* so hard that the craft went into a spin, flipping around and sending its rider flying!

"Aaarrgh!" Gilgamesh cried as he flew. He righted himself in the air, and fired more weapons from the Gate of Babylon, while standing on the flying carpet used by Aladdin. Super Sonic was already on his trail, and weaved between the shots before flying up at Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh pulled a sword out with one hand and brought it down on

Sonic. Super Sonic clapped his hands together to catch the sword, but as he did, Gilgamesh was making his next move. With his free hand, the King of Heroes swung another sword horizontally, intent on cleaving Sonic across the middle. Instead of taking it, without letting go of the first sword, Sonic kicked back against Gilgamesh's arm and shot back down to the deck. He landed on a flagpole, which bent under his weight, before flinging him back at Gilgamesh. Before Gilgamesh could even react to this action, Super Sonic's Homing Shot nailed him right in the gut, knocking him out of the air. As they fell, Gilgamesh grabbed hold of Sonic and threw him away in frustration.

This is absurd! Gilgamesh thought in fury, How can I be struggling against this alien mongrel!? Even with his jewels, he should be no match for me!

Eggman watched the battle on his big screen in the Egg Saucer's main control room. He smirked. So far, things were progressing nicely. A bit more tweaking...

A crash caught his ear. Eggman pushed a button, and view on the screen changed to show another section of the Egg Saucer's deck. It featured Metal Sonic and Servant Saber in battle. Eggman frowned. This would require a bit more tweaking as well...

A thunderous crash filled the air as Metal Sonic and *Excalibur* collided once again. The force field that surrounded the robotic Hedgehog shimmered, gave off sparks, and buzzed as it tried to deflect the mystical aura of Saber's Noble Phantasm. Saber gritted her teeth as she tried to compete the chop, but instead both she and Metal were blasted away, flying in opposite directions. Saber recovered quickly enough, flipping onto her feet, while Metal did the opposite. Activating his thruster, he circled around in the air and used the momentum to shoot at Saber with his claws in front.

" *Avalon!* "

Saber's sheath appeared before her, and then dissolved into a countless mass of particles that encircled her. When Metal Sonic struck her, he found himself being pushed aside until he was right behind her. Confused, Metal twisted around to take Saber's back, only to see she was already moving to slice at him with her sword. Metal rocketed up, glaring down at his target.

SUBJECT: SABER_

NOW HAS FORCEFIELD CAPABILITIES_

INITIATE SCAN_

ERRORERRORERRORDOESNOTCOMPUTE

It's trying to scan and analyze Avalon, Saber deduced, A pity for him, my scabbard was forged by the fair folk, and is beyond human understanding!

Perhaps frustrated by his inability to fully copy the abilities of Avalon, Metal Sonic blasted towards Saber with his own forcefield energized. As usual, their collision sent the two flying back a step.

But... I can't leave things the way they are. I have to break this stalemate. Saber thought, If this becomes a battle of attrition, my Mana will run out long before Metal Sonic's fuel does. A light bulb turned on in her mind. That's it!

Metal Sonic rocketed at Saber, and they clashed. But instead of trying to match Metal Sonic's force, Saber twisted her sword parried his attack, knocking the robot aside. Just as Metal righted himself, Saber used her Mana Burst technique to shoot herself at the robot, swinging *Excaliber*. Rather than speeding away or activating his own shield, Metal shifted his body's position to dodge Saber's blade. As Metal spun about to strike Saber, the knight called upon *Avalon* to shield herself. As Metal was pushed around the barrier, Saber was already spinning about to chop him. This time, Metal wasn't able to bring up his forcefield in time.

ZANG!

That was the noise *Excaliber* made when it carved into Metal's arm. The robot was incapable of actually widening his eyes, but Saber swore that their increased brightness was to illustrate the surprise he was no doubt experiencing. But he got over it quickly, and retreated from Saber as quickly as his rockets could allow. Metal Sonic's cleaved arm fell to the deck with a clatter, but Saber was already pressing her attack, emboldened by the wound she gave the robot. Metal, for his part, had formed his shield and began to rocket back at Saber. But Saber could see that the forcefield was not as stable as it once had been.

I must have damaged a crucial component in its machinery, Saber realized, Good! It should be easy to break through that field, now!

But it would not be that simple. Instead of striking at Saber, Metal Sonic suddenly curved his path upwards, taking an aerial position above the knight. The turbine in his chest began to glow, and then a bolt of yellow energy suddenly shot at Saber. Saber ducked around it, but as she did another bolt shot at her. As Metal flew around, he kept firing bolts of energy at Saber. Saber danced around all of them, and then leapt up to behead the robot. Metal quickly circled around Saber to kick her in the head, but she blocked with Avalon. As Saber landed on the floor, she heard a gun shot from behind her. Looking behind, she saw that a group of those Egg Pawns, armed with laser rifles, had gathered and were trying to shoot her. Annoyed, but not wanting even their minut efforts to interfere in her duel, Saber changed her attention from fighting Metal Sonic to destroying the Egg Pawns. They didn't last more then the second it took for Saber run over and slice the lot of them to pieces.

But why didn't Metal Sonic attack me while my attention was drawn? Saber thought.

When Saber looked back, she got her answer. While she had been distracted by the Egg Pawns, another flying robot -An Egg Robo - had hovered up to Metal Sonic and was inserting something inside

his jet turbine stomach. Saber could see that it was a canister, with a glowing substance inside.

It's full of Rings! Saber realized, But how will that help? Can Power Rings give robots the same protection they give living beings?

Metal Sonic made a noise like VCR fast-forwarding, and the glow inside of the capsule began to permeate throughout his body. Metal then began to rocket at Saber twice as fast as before! Saber activated Avalon to shield herself, but as she chopped at Metal to counter, he was already moving around for a second attack, kicking at her. His foot connected with Saber's elbow, striking her funny bone and almost causing her to drop the sword. But, she held firm (In spite of the weird feeling in her arm) and continued to fight back.

He's trying to get me to lose my grip on Excaliber, Saber realized, But I've seen enough of his moves to understand his style now.

Saber and Metal continued to dance around each other, trying to create an opening and strike at the other. At one point, Metal caught the sword with his remaining hand, only to be sent flying when Saber kicked him. Metal Sonic recovered fast enough, and his eyes' red glow deepened.

INITIATING: GAE BOLG_

Saber felt it. That feeling in her bones and nerves and every other sensation, that the spinning record called reality was about to skip. She had felt this once before, while fighting Lancer. If Sonic had not told her about Metal Madness once before, she would have been caught off guard. But she knew that Metal Sonic had acquired the power to halt time, however briefly.

She had brought up her sword just in time to stop Metal's attempt to pierce her heart. The robot hedgehog made a series of angry and confused beeps, clearly unable to comprehend how Saber had blocked his attack.

"It seems that on top of being a poor copy of Sonic, you also make a poor Lancer," Saber taunted, "And that move didn't work when *he* tried it!"

Saber swung her sword down, and this time Metal wasn't able to get away in time. While he still had his remaining arm, Metal's clawed hand was ruined. Split down the middle, crackling with electricity. It throbbed for a second, before exploding, leaving Metal Sonic with a missing arm, and an arm that had no hand, only a socket with exposed, damaged wires dangling out. Metal rocketed up into the air, and began to fire energy bursts down at Saber. The lady knight pressed her attack, weaving between blasterfire and leaping up to attack Metal again. Curling into a ball, Metal Sonic began to spin around and at light speed looped around under Saber and struck her in the back. Saber grunted as she hit the ground, but she recovered and rolled to the side in time to avoid being shredded as Metal's spinning form came down down. Metal Sonic continued to 'roll' at Saber, the heat from his thrusters exhaust acting as a stand-in for Sonic's sharp quills.

But as fast as Metal was, his movements were linear, easy to predict. Saber chose to avoid Metal, jumping out of the way to avoid his charges. As she dodged his attacks, she considered the best way to deal with the robot.

With his speed, it will be difficult to attack him, Saber considered, His speed means if I attack him head-on, he'll dodge...That's it!

As Metal's spinning form circled around to attack her again, Saber pulled her sword back, ready to stab. As Metal Sonic came at her, Saber tensed up. She could feel the wind kick up as he approached. Then, at the last minute, she stepped aside. To an outsider, it happened in an instant. But, when seen through a super-slow-motion playback, they would see Saber stepping aside to narrowly dodge Metal Sonic. At the same time, she thrust her sword forward, clearly intent on impaling Metal through the side. As fast as it was, Metal *still* managed to change course fast enough to avoid being destroyed outright- but not enough to avoid damage. Metal Sonic spinning, but

floated in the air, with his left leg twitching. It was the only limb he had left.

But Saber could see that the fight had not gone from Metal's eyes. But instead of charging at Saber, Metal Sonic flew up into the air and began to fire energy bolts at Saber. Once more on the defensive, Saber was amazed at how Metal could keep fighting even reduced to his current state. But she saw that his position in the sky was flimsy. Spotting a nearby building, Saber turned and ran towards. Intrigued by this apparent cowardice, Metal followed after Saber, his flight a bit wobbly from his lack of limbs. Reaching the building, Saber did not bother to search for an entrance. Instead, she ran up the wall. Shifting her footing ever-so-slightly avoid Metal Sonic's bursts. Once she was high enough, Saber kicked off, and did Prana Burst to project herself through the air. Metal Sonic, who had been rocketing at Saber as fast as it could, was caught off guard Saber's sudden acceleration, and floundered in the air. The delay was exactly what Saber needed. With one swing of her sword, Saber ended the fight. Metal Sonic's head fell onto the ground and rolled into a corner, while what was left of his body crashed.

Saber landed back down and looked at the head. She saw that the eyes, which once burned so fiercely, had gone out, and knew that the duel was over. Sighing, she turned towards the Egg Tower, the main headquarters of Doctor Eggman.

To be continued_

Einzbern Consulation Room

Irisviel: Hello, everyone! And welcome to the Einzbern Consulation Room! I'm your host, Irisviel! Normally, I would be assisted by Zecchan, but she's busy helping people get ready in Fuyuki. ***(For all the good it will do...)***

Lancer: Huh? What is this place?

Irisviel: Welcome, Lancer! This is our consulation room, where we help Servants who died in the War move on to join the Holy Grail.

Lancer: "We"? All I see here is you.

Irisviel: Illya's here, as well. She seemed sleepy, so I put here down on that mat over there. **(She'll never wake up)**

Illya: Zzzz...ugh...zzz

Lancer: Huh? Why's...oh, right. She's Grail container. So I'm in her mind, or something?

Irisviel: That's not important, Lancer. Is there anything you regret, now that you've died? **(Again.)**

Lancer: Not really.

Irisviel: Eh hh?!

Lancer: I got to have more cool fights than I thought I would, and Bazett's still alive now, and that priest is dead. Plus, it's nice to have my death taken seriously for once. What more could I ask for?

Irisviel: Uwaaa! I can't stand it! You're casual demeanor is such a pain! Shoo! Shoo!

Lancer: Whoa! What are you doing with that gatling gun! Where's my spear?

(Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat!)

Irisviel: Oh no! Lancer died!

Illya: Zzzz- y'b'st- zzz...

Irisviel: Well, sorry that seemed short, but we're getting ready for the end! There won't be any questions answered! And for all those who

think there are any errors from the source material, just remember,
"The Chaos Emeralds are probably to blame." Byeee!

Dream of an Absolution

Chapter 29: Dream of an Absolution

" Where am I?"

Illya looked around her surroundings in confusion. It was a forest, very much like the one Papa would takes with her through. And yet, something was off. Even though there was a layer of snow that covered the ground and treetops, even though she was wearing her casual skirt and shirt, she didn't feel cold.

In fact, she didn't feel anything. It was if she was walking through an illusion. Illya reached out to touch a tree. As she did, she heard the crunching sound of footsteps on frost approaching from behind. Illya didn't turn her head, but for some reason the world seemed to rotate around her, so she was looking behind.

" Mama?" Illya gasped.

Irisviel smiled sadly. "I'm sorry, Illyasviel."

Forgetting herself, Illya ran towards the taller woman in front of her. But as she threw her arms around Irisviel's waist, all the girl felt was air. Illya looked about in confusion, distraught. There was no one there but her.

" Mama! Where are you? Mama!" Illya cried out, " Mama! "

But the lost daughter's cries just echoed out into nothingness. Even the winter forest was gone...

Floating listlessly in a glass tube, Illya shed a tear.

The inner workings of the Egg Tower's lower levels were more complex and dangerous than anything that could be found in the rest

of the craft. There were no walkways, just convenient platforms that moved about erratically. Giant gears turned slowly, massive turbines buzzed and gave off inhuman amounts of heat. And there was no floor. A fall would take one down and out of the Egg Saucer completely...if they survived going through the exhaust vents at all, that is.

Archer navigated these treacherous surroundings with his usual poise and calculated movements. He knew he only had a second to move from one obstacle to the next before being crushed, burned, and dropped away. A wrong turn would mean certain death for a normal, even abnormal man.

I know these areas are manned by robots and not people, but this is too much! Archer thought as he jumped from a platform to a giant set of gears. *Sometimes I wonder if Eggman made these places just for pure aesthetics!*

Archer saw a nearby pillar rotating, and leapt from the gears towards it. Grasping the studs along the pillars surface, Archer swung around and leapt towards another giant gear. He waited as the turning gear lifted him higher, and then jumped up on the next gear so he wouldn't be crushed between the studs. Once he was high enough, Archer leapt to a floating platform. Once he landed, he saw a group of robots flying towards him. Projecting his bow, Archer shot down the Flapper's before they could get within the needed range to use their own guns.

Archer, what are you doing?!

Rin's telepathic demand nearly took Archer by surprised. He had forgotten that to conserve Mana, he hadn't been using his Independent Action skill. It was a good thing he had already found stable footing on the platform. Composing himself, Archer took a leap that carried to a door for service robots.

I'm making my way through the Egg Saucer, Rin, Archer assured his Master, *I'm sorry I had to abandon our original plan, but...*

Rin cut off his excuses. *Do you have any idea what's happening right now!?*

Fuyuki was in a state of panic. But, unlike before, the fear had been from an unexplained order to evacuate the city to escape from a mysterious threat. Now, the mystery had been solved. The giant flying saucer could be seen on the horizon, getting slightly larger as time went on. Not since the original broadcast of Orson Wells' *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast in 1938 was a populace given such a scare. But it wasn't a show this time. It was for real.

At the temple gate of the Ryuudou Shrine, Rin, Sakura and Bazett watched as Eggman's flying base approached the city. They could tell, by some inborn mage's instinct, that the Egg Saucer was on a direct course for them. Although they knew that Team Sonic and the Servants were working to stop Eggman's plot, their apprehension grew with every passing moment.

Bazett found herself staring at her hand, where her Command Seals used to be. Kirei had used them up during his time as Lancer's 2nd Master, but she and Lancer had such a bond that she didn't need to use Absolute Orders. She had wanted to give Lancer, the hero she admired another chance at life, only to lose it again to Gilgamesh. She wondered just how far they would have gone in the Holy Grail War if it hadn't been for Kotomine and Gilgamesh's machinations.

Rin then said, "Sakura, you should go evacuate," Although she tried to speak evenly, the anxiety in Rin's voice was evident. "It may not be too late. Y-you can get out before..." She trailed off.

Sakura watched the sky, almost listless. She didn't fear whatever disaster Eggman's weapon would bring to the world. She had been living as if her death would come at any day. But she also knew that the people who saved her, were working to thwart his plans. But more than that...

"You asked me where I wanted to be, *Nee-san* ," Sakura answered, "And, I want to be here. With you."

Rin, who had been stubbornly standing while Rin and Bazett sat on the steps, sat down. She had tried to look strong for her sister, but as usual, Sakura had been the better of the two. Looking back, Rin realized that she would never have been able to withstand the Zouken's cruel tortures, while Sakura had endured it for over a decade.

"I hate this..." Rin said at last, "I hate having nothing to do, while everyone else is working so hard."

"But it was your idea to come here," Sakura pointed out, "Surely that's helping, isn't it?"

Seeing Sakura's point, Rin nodded, smiling. *You got that, Archer? I'll be giving you Mana, so you better not screw this up!*

Archer sent back, *You can count on me, Rin, always...*

Gunfire filled the air as Shirou jumped over and ducked under conveyor belts. He briefly left his cover to throw a Projection of *Kanshou* to destroy a Snail Blaster on the wall, before doing a roll behind crate of spare Egg Pawn heads. Once he was there, he Projected a *Bakuya* to destroy a Technosqueek that was getting too close for comfort. A fair distance away, Assassin was practically a blur, beheading the more humanoid Badniks such as the Egg Pawns and Egg Robos were around.

Shirou and Assassin, after taking down Shinji, followed the doorway to where they hoped would lead them to Illya. Instead, they wandered right into the main manufacturing plant of the Egg Saucer. While most of Eggman's robots had been sent up top to deal with the other heroes, there were still enough stationed to give the two a bit of trouble.

"If we stay together, they'll only have to concentrate their firepower onto a single point," Assassin advised, "Let's split up and divide their attention."

Shirou nodded, agreeing to his proposal, and added, "Don't bother to use your Presence Concealment. These aren't living things that your Servant abilities can fool. Robots have machines for eyes."

"That goes without saying." Assassin agreed.

Shirou released his Projection of *Bakuya* and Projected a bow. He began to fire Projected arrows at as many Badniks as he could. As he did, he leapt from his hiding place and broke out into a mad dash towards the exit. Thanks to Shirou's arrows and Assassin's fast swordplay, the robots were in a madcap frenzy. Shirou's arrows struck vital joints, throwing off their ability to function and causing some of them to shoot each other by accident. Meanwhile, because Assassin had executed their fellows with insane speed and finesse, the survivors were panicking at the idea of going the same way. As such, none of them were able to stop the two Japanese men from escaping the room.

But the next chamber was just as bad. Besides a small walkway that led to an observation platform, it was just a giant conveyor belt over a massive pit. There was no floor to speak of. Up above there was a giant robot arm that seemed to serve no tangible purpose aside from grabbing anything that was on the belt, while at the end of the beltway was the entrance to what looked like a furnace. And what was worse, the only other door was on the opposite side of the room.

"Do you need my help for this one?" Assassin asked.

"Give me a moment," Shirou replied, breathing heavily. He wasn't really tired as he was trying to keep the adrenaline rush from overriding his thought processes. If this was what Sonic had to deal with, then it was no wonder why he and his friends were so excitable!

I can't rush this, Shirou thought, I need to plan out what I'm going to do very carefully...

Just Reinforce his legs and jump? He would probably fall and die, dying the bottom with his blood. Try to use the crane to swing across the distance? That would require very precise luck, and if it failed, either Shirou would be crushed in its grip, or be flung against the wall, and *then* fall into the pit.

I just wish I could Project a tool that could help, Shirou thought, Like a rope, or a harpoon-

A strange, and possibly crazy idea came to him. It was risky, reckless, and if it failed, might get *two* men killed. But Shirou couldn't dislodge the thought from his head.

"Go ahead without me," Shirou told Assassin, "I'll be across in a minute. But, um, please get ready to defend, will you?"

While Assassin leapt across the pit, Shirou held out his hand and focused. He thought about that moment, when he first became a Master. He thought about the first time he was killed in the War, even though he did not die. And he thought about the common element in both those events. And as he thought, the crimson spear appeared in his hands.

" *Gae Bolg!* "

There was a rush of air, and Shirou was across the chamber. There was a clash of blades, and the thud of a body hitting the floor. Shirou looked up at Assassin, who looked a bit shaken, having narrowly blocked and parried the spear that would have otherwise pierced his heart if it had been in more skilled hands. He also seemed a bit angry, but given the circumstances, who wouldn't?

"Does Saber know how reckless you are?" Assassin asked, "Or were you hiding it up until now?"

"Well," Shirou let the fake-Gae Bolg fade away, "I think she'd be happier I risked someone else's life instead of mine."

Assassin couldn't help but laugh.

After beating Dragon Breath, Team Knuckles (He insisted on changing the name), were on a fast-track to the Egg Saucer's main generator. Unfortunately, that track led them to a corridor full of giant pistons, which caused huge amounts of steam to vent out each time one slammed down. Crossing the pistons meant not just waiting for one to push, but also being careful not to get burned by the vents when they blew out steam. Thankfully, there were no Badniks in sight within the corridor. Unfortunately for Knuckles, there was a giant red spring hidden under the floor, and it sent him flying backwards when he ran into it by mistake. The Echidna was nearly thrown back into the piston hall, but thankfully Tails and Amy were right behind, and managed to catch him.

"Whoa!" Tails cried, "That was close!"

"Eggman's really improved his traps," Amy commented as she and Tails set Knuckles on his feet. "In the old days, that probably would have been just a bunch of spikes."

"Yeah, well," Knuckles grunted, a little embarrassed. "Thanks for- *Bwa ha ha!* "

Tails and Amy looked on uncomprehendingly as Knuckles suddenly doubled over in laughter.

"Your- your fur!" Knuckles choked, "I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't, but... *hahaha!* "

"Our fur?" Amy asked, "What about your fur?"

All three of them had developed the worst, full-body perms ever seen. It looked like someone had put them in a tumble clothes dryer

without something to deal with the static. It had been a side effect of the steam.

After patting themselves down and smoothing at their fur, the trio moved on. Soon, they upon a large room, which had three Egg Hammers guarding a archway which had a forcefield in place of a door. Seeing the heroes, the Egg Hammers went on the assault, lumbering towards Team Knuckles with intent to squash.

"We're right outside were Illya is!" Tails announced as he flew away from one hammer. Once he was high enough, and slammed into the Egg Hammer's head in Spinball form, stunning it briefly.

"So, are these guys the last line of defense?" Amy asked as she ran around the legs of another Egg Hammer, "I was expecting another Sub-Boss."

Knuckles landed a triple-punch in the chest of the third Egg Hammer. Jumping out of the way of its counterattack, Knuckles went into a Spin Dash to cannonball at the Egg Hammer's legs.

"We probably destroyed all of the Sub-Bosses," Knuckles remarked, "We've definitely got Eggman on the ropes."

"Or, since we're so close to the power room, Eggman didn't want to risk a massive battle wrecking his equipment." Tails said as he stationed himself on Egg Hammer #1's head.

Meanwhile, Amy had managed to get atop #2's head as well, and was giving it a beatdown with her own hammer. As she did, #2 saw Tails atop #1, and #1 took notice of Amy. The two robots faced each other down and raised their massive mallets.

"Amy, jump!" Tails cried.

"Right!" Amy agreed.

The two animals bailed just as the Egg Hammers swung their hammers. Naturally, they ended up destroying each other, sending their shattered parts flying as the air screeched with the noise. One piece of shrapnel nailed Knuckles in the back, as he had been too preoccupied with the third Egg Hammer. Rings fell from Knuckles as he stumbled forward, and the Echidna just barely managed to scoop some back up before #3 lumbered at him. Knuckles went into a Spin Dash and sped between the Egg Hammer's legs. Then, he rebounded off of the wall rammed into #3's back. The force caused the Egg Hammer to fall forward and crash into pieces. Getting up, Knuckles dusted himself off.

"Anything else?" He asked.

Tails was already at the electric barrier, typing on Miles Electric. "Just gotta open this door. I think I've figured out which algorithm to input..."

But Knuckles was in no mood to hear any more of Tails' overly-technical jargon. Walking up to the archway, he rubbed his right fist with his left palm before punching the wall with all his might. Nothing happened. Knuckles frowned, and began to punch it again, and again.

Amy shook her head as she watched the boys work. Looking about the room, she found that the center of the floor gave off a hollow sound compared to the rest of the room. Using her hammer carefully, she lifted the lid up and found a big, green button with the words, "DO NOT PUSH WITHOUT DR. EGGMAN'S PERMISSION. WE REALLY MEAN IT!" Amy struck the button, and the forcefield shut off.

"I did it!" Tails and Knuckles declared.

"Suuure you did," Amy said patronizingly, "Now, let's go!"

Moving ahead, they came found poor Illya, trapped in her glass tube at the end of the hall.

"Stand back!" Knuckles ordered, and punched the glass.

The floor was littered with little beads (Eggman must have used easy-break glass for safety reasons), and Illya fell right into Amy's arms. The homunculus had stilted, uneven breaths, but otherwise did not react. And she didn't wake up.

"How could Eggman out such a sweet, innocent child through all this?" Amy demanded.

Tails briefly recalled how the 'Sweet, innocent child' had once set her pet monster onto him and Sonic. After shaking away the bad memory, he said, "We've got to find Saber. Avalon is our best bet to help Illya recover."

"Well, we can't go the way we came in," Knuckles said, "Time to make our own exit!"

Knuckles walked up to a part of the wall with the words "Danger! Do not punch" printed in large, helpful letters and slugged it. The metal gave away showing a passage on the other side.

Eggman watched on a security monitor as Team Knuckles took Illya away. For what it mattered. He had drained plenty of energy from the albino girl. And it just so happened that there was *another* source of power currently on the Egg Saucer's topside. Eggman pushed a button so the main screen showed Gilgamesh's location. What he saw was a grown man in golden armor being knocked about by what looked like a shiny, bright ping-pong ball.

"Is it ready?" Eggman asked Orbot.

"Yes, it's all set," Orbot reported from his own console, "But, how are we going to-?"

"You leave that to me." Eggman interrupted smugly, stroking his mustache.

Cubot spoke up. "Hey, not to be a buzzkill, but what are we going to do about Saber?" He pointed at a screen to show her running up a stairway on the outside. "She's getting really close to the central command."

Eggman snickered. "Ha! We'll see about that. Get a load of this!"

Saber was now on top of a catwalk, making her way towards the Egg Tower's top. She hoped that was where Eggman was hiding; If she could take him down, it would hinder his scheme for the world. As she ran, she saw, much to her surprise, a trio of golden rings floating in a line in the air. Without thinking, she jumped and ran her hand through the hoops. The energy of the Rings entered her body, replenishing the Mana she had spent in her duel with Metal Sonic.

Power Rings here as well! But why? We're not in a Special Zone or Reality Marble! Saber thought.

A loud explosion caught her ears, and she turned her eyes towards it. In the distance, she saw what was unmistakably Gilgamesh...but something was off. Instead of arrogantly looking down on people as he normally did, the King of Heroes was hunched over, and shaking. Why became obvious a second later, as something bright and *fast* slammed into him. Saber was mesmerized by the sight of Gilgamesh, the Archer of the Fourth War, flying away and off of the building. She wrenched her eyes away from the man in gold as his assailant stopped moving for Saber to make out its form.

Sonic! She realized, *Is that what he looks like when he calls upon the power of all seven Emeralds?*

This must be why Power Rings are appearing. It's the energy of the Chaos Emeralds that causes the Rings to manifest, and there were now seven all over the Egg Saucer. But Saber was even more surprised to see, from what she could tell, that Gilgamesh was *struggling*. But maybe that wasn't surprising. Gilgamesh had always been the most powerful Servant in both Wars...but now he was

fighting someone who could match his power, and had the skills to use it effectively. His arrogance meant he had never considered anyone could be his equal, and grew complacent.

And Sonic is always fighting, living as if he was on the edge, Saber affirmed, He may get cocky now and then, but he's never taken things easy...with his grit and the Emeralds, he's also went to the extreme!

But she also saw that no matter how many times Gilgamesh went down, he would get back up, more furious than ever. This was truly a battle of titans. Saber could see that their battle was slowly destroying the Egg Saucer, and if the damage became went too far, it would have a bad effect on the land below. Saber also saw that some of Eggman's robots were gathering towards the battle. Frowning, she set off to for a closer look.

She barely went three steps when she felt the world turn.

Not the entire world, of course. But, the top of the Egg Saucer, the buildings, the walkways...they began to shift. Like a sliding puzzle, the layout of the topside changed, switching around the placement of the facilities. This had the end result sending Saber back to the edge of the Egg Saucer. However, she could still the flashes of light and sound of forces clashing to know what direction to go in.

Gilgamesh leapt through the sky, wearing the same winged shoes Persues wore when he went to slay Medusa. A vein on his forehead was highly visible, showing the world just how angry he was. It galled him to have to dip so far into his Gate of Babylon, to take an opponent seriously. But he was determined to win, at any cost. He heard the rush of air and swung his out, just in time to punch Super Sonic away. Sonic bounced off of a building, but instead of going back at Gilgamesh, went down to the floor. Confused, Gilgamesh lowered himself to better see what he was planning. He soon regretted it. Super Sonic had gone into a loop, running in circles so quickly that he created a ring of light. This had the effect of creating

a powerful cyclone that sent Gilgamesh spinning, throwing him off-balance. Sonic immediately broke away from his circle, leapt up to rebound off of a wall, nailing Gilgamesh right in the stomach.

This is absurd! Gilgamesh thought as he flew through the air.
Nothing I do seems to even phase him! Is he invincible!?

That idea that, yes, he was no longer the more powerful fighter in a duel, was so abhorrent to Gilgamesh that it actually allowed him to ignore the sheer pain in his gut and recover in the air. But, his three-point landing was interrupted when an obstacle suddenly came from behind.

PING!

Gilgamesh once again went flying, but not by Sonic's hand. Instead, he had collided with a giant bumper, about the size of a car tire. and painted red with a white in the center. It was held up by rockets, and was angled in way that sent Gilgamesh away not towards Sonic, but further away. Super Sonic blinked in confusion, but he realized that he was running low on Rings. He would have to have to gather more if he wanted to finish his fight with Gilgamesh.

Meanwhile, Gilgamesh righted himself on a platform. He was already angry at Sonic, but that bumper had widened his rage at the world in general. When Super Sonic didn't zip out of nowhere to bash into his side again, Gilgamesh took a deep breath, trying to quell the fire that was burning in his brain. It was curious that a mongrel with speed as his main ability be late for anything.

Gilgamesh spotted a cluster of Power Rings off in the distance- more and more were appearing as he and Sonic fought- only to vanish as Super Sonic leapt through the bunch of them. This confused Gilgamesh.

Why would he need more of those? He's already...aha! The King of Heroes smiled evilly as the answer came to him, *He needs those*

Rings to maintain his new form! All I need to do is block him from replenishing.

Gilgamesh leapt off, intent on doing Super Sonic harm- and then another rocket-bumper flew into his path. Gilgamesh was bounced away, but as he went, he destroyed the in an instant, swearing profusely.

Curious, Saber thought. What are they up to?

While Saber had wanted to leap in and support Sonic, the movements of Eggman's robots bothered her. So, getting up on top of the tallest antenna she could find, Saber gave herself a bird's-eye view of the action. The widened perspective allowed her to try and determine the flow of the battle. And she didn't like what she saw. Everytime Super Sonic managed to land a solid hit on Gilgamesh, one of those stranger Bumper-bots would fly up and bounce Gilgamesh in a different direction. But every now and then, they would try to get in the way of Super Sonic. The more Saber observed, she began to see a pattern. It almost looked like the robots were trying to herd Sonic and Gilgamesh in a specific direction. Suspicious and concerned, Saber set off in that direction to see if there was anything they should be worried about.

As she ran across the walkways, fuel lines, and railings, Saber ran into a few robots that made a token attempt to attack her. She didn't even bother using her sword and stomped them under her feet as she ran, freeing a few birds along the way.

Saber stopped on the curve of one fuel line. A fair distance away, she could see one smaller tower was topped by a flat platform. While the other buildings were either pointed or rounded (The round ones, for reasons, also had glasses and mustaches...), this specific tower looked like it had been cut with a fine blade. Saber's curiosity piqued, she went in for a closer look. She soon found a vantage point from a floating platform that seemed to be going around in a loop. From that

platform, Saber saw that the top of the tower had several circular grooves on the flat top.

Those lines almost make that structure look like a bulls-eye... Saber determined, feeling uneasy. It's painfully obvious that this is what Eggman is trying to bring Sonic and Gilgamesh to...but why?

She heard a loud cacophony, and knew that the battle was approaching. She knew that she had no time to dither on the subject. If Eggman wanted Sonic over here, then that was all the reason she needed to destroy the premises!

Saber unsheathed her sword. Raising the blade up in the air, Saber willed the power into the blade's tip. It would be too dangerous to use Excalibur's full power, with the Egg Saucer being over Fuyuki (She could feel the leylines of the region), but she could limit the Noble Phantasm's radius of destruction.

Unfortunately, Saber was so focused on the task ahead of her, that she forgot to watch her back. Gilgamesh, fresh from being sent flying *again* by Super Sonic, spotted Saber at work.

"Oh, no you don't!" Gilgamesh yelled, and opened the Gate of Babylon. A battle axe came flying out, and Saber just barely dodged it. "I'm sorry, Saber, but I can't have you damage this facility. I have need of..."

POW!

Once again, Super Sonic can flying out of nowhere and cannonballed directly into Gilgamesh's stomach. Gilgamesh gagged, but managed to catch himself and retaliated by firing a slew of sacred swords at the glowing Hedgehog. Super Sonic weaved in between the barrage, but Gilgamesh pulled out a ornate shield to block him, and then delivered a punch to the jaw. Sonic fell back, and as he stood up, saw that multiple Gates of Babylon were opening all around him.

"No escape this time," Gilgamesh hissed with unnatural viciousness.
" *Die!* "

The Gates released their contents. They bombarded Sonic, but Sonic didn't run. Super Sonic went into a Super Spin Dash, and the force of his rotation *deflected* the barrage of sacred weapons. After a few seconds, Sonic released his spin, but he didn't hit Gilgamesh in the stomach.

This time, it was the head.

Instead of flying backwards, Gilgamesh just...fell. His body, completely stiff, leaned backwards until he was flat on his back. Besides the red mark on his forehead where Sonic struck him, his face was completely blank. Sonic and Saber stared at his prone form in confusion.

&Break&

Archer felt good about his progress. Even though he had wasted precious Mana on that robo-Eggman, he found plenty of Power Rings floating about the interior tunnels to help recharge.

" **AARRRRRGGGGHHH!** "

Archer stopped. He looked around. Whatever that anguished howl of fury was, it was like no other he had ever felt before. And yet, it filled him with joy for some reason...

"I have had enough this!" Gilgamesh was practically spitting as he unleashed his fury. "This has to be some sort of nightmare...I ate some of Kirei's Mapo Tofu before bed, that's what this is causing this!"

Gilgamesh stood up, and then leapt to the top of the building Saber had been seeking to destroy. Sonic had gone back a bit to gather a few extra Rings, so Saber ran to face him. She prepared to unleash

her Noble Phantasm once more, but Gilgamesh fired several swords at her, forcing the knight to retreat. When Sonic came shooting back, Gilgamesh reached into his Gate and pulled out none other than Lancer's Gae Bolge and lobbed it. The spear shot through time and space and struck Sonic directly in the chest, knocking him to the floor.

"Unbelievable...you won't die no matter which I treasure I pull out..." Gilgamesh had a mad gleam in his eye as he glared down at his opponents, "What can I possibly do to change that...?"

"You can try asking nicely," Sonic replied, "Maybe, 'Pretty please with sugar on top'?"

"Oh, no... *that* won't satisfy me..." Gilgamesh reached into his Gate once more, "But *this* will!"

The weapon Gilgamesh had pulled out was like neither Saber or Sonic had ever seen. It had a golden hilt very similar to the armor the King of Heroes wore. But the sword itself...the blade gave off a red and black light, like a forge of the gods had hammered the dawn and dusk into a single piece of steel.

Seeing it, Saber had a premonition; *If he swings that sword, everyone will die.*

Even Sonic, who almost never hesitated to throw himself into danger, found himself unable to move. The aura of Gilgamesh's sword was so powerful that his enhanced senses could feel its threat.

"This is *Ea* , my most valuable treasure," Gilgamesh said, drunk on the fear in their eyes. "Consider yourselves lucky, mongrels. Very few are deemed worthy of dying by it."

Saber and Sonic tensed up, both preparing to move. They knew that they would only have barely a second to act. Luckily, Gilgamesh was still inclined to brag, which bought them some time.

Stepping close, Saber whispered to Sonic, "Keep him from swinging his weapon down. I'll follow up with a clean hit that should finish this..."

"...You've shown me the greatest power of your world," Gilgamesh was finishing up his spiel, "So let me show you the greatest of *mine!*"

Gilgamesh raised *Ea* into the air. Before anyone could do anything, however, there came a loud click and whirr. A set of metal rings suddenly rose up around Gilgamesh, held by two steel poles. The rings began to glow, and released powerful bolts of electricity that caused Gilgamesh to cry out in alarm and pain. Saber and Sonic watched in morbid fascination as Gilgamesh's pallow grew paler, and paler, and his armor began to rust and decay. When *Ea* vanished, the two realized what was happening.

"That thing is draining Gilgamesh of his energy!" Sonic exclaimed. He had experienced something similar when Eggman tried to harness the power of Dark Gaia.

"Exactly what happened to Rin when she was captured." Saber noted. So that had been Eggman's plan. He had manipulated Sonic and Gilgamesh's battle to steal their power for himself.

But they could see that what Rin experienced was but a tickle, compared to Gilgamesh's tortures. When the energy siphon finally shut off, there was no sign of the Fourth Archer. Sonic felt the energy of the Chaos Emeralds run out, his quills drooped and normal color returned, as he and Saber went to the platform for a closer look. Neither wanted to get too close to the device, not wanting to suffer a similar fate. All they could see was a pile of rubble, like dried mud that had crumbled in the sun.

Saber had very mixed feelings about this. As much as she disliked Gilgamesh's arrogance and supreme apathy towards anything that wasn't him, as dangerous as he was to everyone, he was still a Spirit

from the Throne of Heroes. For his final fate to be *that* , though...it was not an end she had wanted to wish on him. It was so ignoble.

Sonic, on the other hand, had a different concern. Why, exactly, would Eggman willingly destroy what was probably one of his most powerful partners to date?

&Break&

The answer, of course, was that Eggman simply had no need for partners at this date. Thanks to the energy his external, top-deck siphon had drained from Gilgamesh, his Egg Grail (Patent Pending) was at maximum power. And the act of doing so had felt so good for Eggman. Too many times had he been double-crossed by what he thought were reliable allies. He enjoyed being the betrayer for once. He only wished he could have been present so as to deliver a grand speech, to better twist the knife. Well, you couldn't have everything.

And speaking of everything... Eggman's eyes lit up as he saw the numbers on the Energy core rise to 100%. "Bingo!" He looked down at his robots. "How close are we to Fuyuki?"

"We're just above Mt. Ryuudou," Cubot announced, "The military tried to intervene, but our automated defenses took care of them."

"I'm doing a preliminary check on the Genesis Ray Cannon." Orbot stated.

"And everything's in order?" Eggman demanded, "I don't want a repeat of the Wisp plan!"

There came a beep and Orbot's screen showed a thumb's-up. "Everything checks out, boss." Orbot reported.

" *Good* ," Eggman purred, and then gestured dramatically. "Open the Big Hatch!"

Archer was beginning to feel a little desperate. He had just gotten a message from Rin that the Egg Saucer was directly on top of the Temple. Still aloft, but if it fell, it would take out the entire city and a piece of the mountain. And he still had found no trace of Illya.

Archer kicked open one last door, and came upon a giant, empty space. There were other walkways and doors, but the main feature of the area was a large tube-like structure in the center of the ceiling, capped by a red dome that seemed built to split into four sections. Archer was about to take a closer look when he heard more doors opening. Getting on his guard, Archer relaxed when he saw that it was Tails, Knuckles, and Amy. And on Amy's back...

Illya!

Archer went over to the outsiders as quick as he could, which meant Amy almost dropped Illya in shock. Archer caught the homunculus, stunned at how still she was.

"Whoa!" Amy gasped, "Where'd you come from?"

Archer ignored Amy's question to ask his own. "What happened to her?"

"Eggman was draining her energy," Tails explained, "So, she's probably just tired from the ordeal. I hope..."

That "I hope" bothered Archer quite a bit. But just then he heard another door opening. This time, the next round of intruders were none other than Shirou and Assassin.

"You guys!" Shirou cried when he saw the group. He ran over to them, while Assassin stayed back. "I've been looking everywhere for you!"

"Okay, how the heck did *you* get up here?" Knuckles demanded.

Shirou ignored Knuckles to take Illya from Archer. He didn't even deign to acknowledge the Servant's presence, his focus entirely on his sister's health. She was breathing...but when she didn't react to his presence at all.

"Eggman drained her magic power," Tails explained, "She'll wake up after a while...I hope..."

Before either Shirou or Archer could react poorly to that 'I hope', a loud noise caught everyone's attention. The floor beneath the walkways was not a floor, but a gigantic hatch that was opening up. As it did, the large dome on the ceiling split apart, showing what looked like a large tesla coil that was crackling with electricity. The device lowered down towards the opening in the floor, but stopped about halfway.

"What is that thing?" Amy asked, and then gasped. "Is that the Genesis Ray?!"

Archer Projected his bow and fired several arrows. They flew at the Ray's cannon, but instead of destroying the weapon, they impacted an energy field that flickered into existence around the cannon. Clearly, Eggman was taking no chances with his doomsday device.

Tails whipped out the Miles Electric. With a remote access, he scrolled his way through the system, trying to figure out what was happening. "It's protected by a forcefield...but there's no way to deactivate it."

"But, how can he use his Ray if he can't turn off the field?" Shirou asked, "Won't it block the cannon from it's target?"

"Uh, it's programmed to go down the instant the cannon fires," Tails gulped, "And we can't punch through it because the Ray and the forcefield have the same power source. If we try, the entire place might blow up and take us and Fuyuki out at the same time."

"So what do we do?!" Knuckles demanded.

Amy turned on her communicator. "Sonic! We've got a problem! Eggman's going to fire his Genesis Ray! Can you get down here to help?"

" *Sorry, Amy,* " Sonic replied, *" I used up all of my Rings fighting Gilgamesh...I'm grabbing as many as I can, but I'm not sure if we have enough time...* "

Distraight, Shirou looked to Archer for an idea. The Heroic Spirit of the Knight Class seemed to be staring out, not really looking at anything. Archer then looked at Illya, and then Shirou. He held out his hand.

"Give her to me," Archer said. His voice did not hold the usual tone of jeering mockery it normally held. It was the voice of a man who once bore the weight of the world, and was weary of it. "Please...let me hold her once last time."

"What-" Shirou could not articulate a response, and found himself unable to stop Archer from taking Illya from his arms.

Archer hugged Illya closely, his eyes shut tight. Finally, he set Illya down and brushed his hand through his hair. His action undid his usual coiffure. It was now messy...and familiar.

"Tails," Archer said, "How long until the Ray fires?"

"We've got less than a minute!" Tails gulped, reading his gadget's screen.

"That'll do," Archer looked at Shirou, "I'll create what we need to fix this...but you're going to have fire it."

Archer closed his eyes and held out his hand, the palm up. " *Trace On.* "

All of Fuyuki was watching as the Egg Saucer hovered imperiously over Mt. Ryuudou. From his bunker, Mr. Stuart watched in despair the events on a monitor. The military force dispatched to stop Eggman's invasion had been completely routed. All of Japan watched as various news stations covered the story.

But none of them had as good a view of the events as the three ladies at the Ryuudou Temple gate. They stood in the shadow of the Egg Saucer, watching as the flying craft opened its bottom. They could see the flickering light from within the craft. They had been told fleeting stories, vague accounts, of the weapon Eggman built in his plot to take over the world. And now, they were about to get a first-hand look at its fruition.

Rin glared up at the UFO, trying to make it go away by sheer will power. As she did, she heard Archer's voice in her head.

Rin, Archer said, I need your help.

What is it?

I'm going to Project something powerful...something I can't re-create on my own.

And Rin understood. No more words were needed to be said. The tone and emotion from Archer's thoughts told her everything. She reached up towards the Egg Saucer, her Command Seals visible on the back of her right hand. They began to glow

"Servant Archer, by the power of my Command Seal- by the power of *All* of my Command Seals," Rin's eyes seemed to become aflame as she spoke, " *Save the world!* "

Archer felt the power flow into him. It was far more than he had expected. But he also knew it wouldn't be enough. But that was okay. He still had everything- or rather, every *one* he needed. As

Archer concentrated on his Projection, he wondered if he should say something to Shirou. If he should warn him.

No, Archer realized, You'll learn everything I could say once this is over. But, even if you don't, I think it'll be fine. You're not going to become me, after all.

A vein on Archer's forehead pulsed, and his brow soon became soaked with sweat. This was harder than anything he had even done before. It was beyond even his Unlimited Blade Works. Over his hand, the outline of a round object began to form, light gathering to take shape.

"Tails," Archer gasped, "For all the trouble you guys brought along, I'm glad you came. It was fun."

"Archer...?" Tails stepped forwards, but found himself being held back by Knuckles.

The countdown to the Genesis Ray's firing sequence was nearing the end, but so was the formation of Archer's Projection...and his life. The weapon he was bringing into existence was more than his own meager existence. But even as his body became more transparent, the Projection became more solid, more *real*. And as it appeared, Shirou suddenly realized what Archer's plan was.

"Don't...let this go to...waste..." Were Archer's last words as he began to fade away.

Nodding slowly, Shirou reached out and took the Projection. And when he did, he found himself taking more than just the weapon.

Seeing his little sister alive for the last time...

Being given a red long coat from an Executor...

Making a pact to fight for Alya for all time, just to save a relatively few people...

Being tried and executed for a crime he did not commit...

Killing far more than he had ever saved, within multiple lifetimes...

Tails stared at the spot where Archer used to be standing. He knew Knuckles had his mitts on his shoulders, but couldn't feel it. Archer was gone...

A beep from the Miles Electric brought Tails out of his stupor. Checking the readings, he cried, "The Ray's about to fire!"

Shirou fought down the influx of memories that were and weren't his, and turned towards the Ray's cannon. He forced out everything around him. All that mattered was his target.

The Genesis Ray Cannon fired.

It was too late. When the Genesis Ray struck the leylines of Mt. Ryuudou, the result was a full thaumaturgical transformation. Fuyuki was gone, replaced by a distorted metropolis of factories and neon lights.

" *Fragarach!* "

And then it was a few seconds ago. The world had not been changed. The shield was up.

But the Genesis Ray Cannon was destroyed. Gasping, Shirou fell to his knees, the arm he used to fire the Gouging Sword of the War God falling limply at his side. Amy watched him in wonder.

"That was Bazett's weapon..." She murmured, amazed.

"Huh?" Knuckles let go of Tails and clutched. "What just happened? I feel like *deja vu* , only I don't know what I'm repeating!"

"Hey!" Amy walked over to Shirou, and helped him up. "What kind of spell did you use?"

"It...it was Projection," Shirou explained, "Archer re-created the only weapon that could destroy the Genesis Ray, even at the cost of his life."

"But what exactle does it *do*? " Knuckles demanded, now carrying Illya in his arms.

"It's like Lancer's spear, sort of," Shirou continued, "Only instead of space, the Fragarach goes through time to before its target strikes."

"Ohhh...so it's like a form of reversed causality," Tails mused, "It went back to the point in time before the Ray fired, bypassing the forcefield entirely."

"But I remember it happening," Knuckles protested, "And then it didn't happen! How does *that* work?"

"Well," Tails scratched his head, "Well, maybe the retroactive effect only works on a metaphysical level-"

"Tails, are you doing this so you don't have to think about Archer?" Amy interrupted.

Tails paused, and then looked down. "Yeah..." Amy reached over to pat his shoulders. Archer had been a good friend, and losing him was hard to accept.

" *Guys?* " Sonic spoke up over the communicator, " *What's happening down there?* "

Knuckles answered, "We're fine, Sonic. Archer used up all of his power to destroy the Ray. We're saved, but he's gone..."

" *Oh, man...* " Sonic sighed, his voice heavy. " *I wonder who he really was...* "

"I know who he was," Shirou said, softly. "Me."

ERROR

DAMAGE DETECTED

FIRING SEQUENCE CANCELLED

Eggman stared at the bright red letters that flashed over every screen in the command chamber. His jaw hung open as he tried to rein in his shock. Internally, he had this sensation of knowing the Genesis Ray fired, but he also had no *memory* of it happening.

"Wha-What's going on?" Eggman sputtered, "The Ray's not.... No! This can't be happening *again!* "

Off to the side, Orbot and Cubot checked the Egg Saucers and Genesis Ray's functions. While they were used to dealing with the fallout of a plot going awry yet again, it was a bit harder for them to concentrate this time around.

"Uh, is there a word for *déjà vu* when you think you haven't experienced *déjà vu* ?" Cubot asked, his eyes and head rotating. "'Cause, whatever it's called, I think I've got it."

Orbot hummed. "There *does* seem to be a discrepancy in my memory banks as well... Oh!" Orbot pretended to forget about the strange feeling as he checked the read out. "On the good side, the failsafe are keeping the cannons main power battery from self-destructing. That's-" A beep got his attention. "-Looks like we're starting to lose altitude. Never mind."

Eggman growled, and kicked a nearby waste basket. The basket went flying, spilled a few empty cans of Chao Cola, and landed right over Cubot ' s head. Still boiling, Eggman pointed dramatically.

"I'm not going to let it end like this!" He declared, "Prepare the Final Mech! I'll show those heroes exactly what I'm made of!"

It took some time for Shirou's group to meet up with Sonic and Saber. But eventually they found each other on the upper decks. Shirou had been carrying Illya, still unconscious on her back, but he smiled when he saw the two King Arthur's approach. The sentiment was not shared by his Servant.

"Shirou!" Saber cried out, "How did you get here?" She was so stupefied by Shirou's ability to find danger that she briefly forgot about Illya. "Never mind, lay Illyasviel here!"

Shirou did as Saber asked, and Saber plunged Avalon into Illya's body. She worked slowly, to avoid causing Illya undue stress and pain. As Saber did, Shirou explained how he and Assassin came to the Egg Saucer.

"But where did Assassin go?" Knuckles asked.

"I'm not sure," Shirou admitted, "He snuck away while we were concerned about the Genesis Ray's cannon..."

Sonic waved dismissively. "Forget him. What was all that stuff you were saying about Archer?"

And Shirou told them. It was hard, recounting memories that you never experienced but still belonged to you because they came from your future self. But Shirou managed to get the gist of it out with only a minor headache. The others weren't so lucky.

"Wait, I thought this magic ghost system only summoned people from the past," Knuckles commented, scratching his head. "How could someone from the future show up?"

"Well..." Tails opened his mouth to give his opinion, but Knuckles put his hand over it before he could go any further.

"Never mind," The Echidna interrupted, "Archer was magic, from the future, and that's all she wrote!"

Shirou nodded dully. The how's didn't matter at that point. He looked over at Illya's still form. They had saved her, but it felt hollow. Illya would die within a year. And that happened in the timeline where she *hadn't* been used as a living battery.

Amy, meanwhile, looked at her feet sadly. "I feel bad for Archer. Now he's got to go back to being a...Counter Guardian. Unless..." She looked Shirou thoughtfully. "Maybe if you don't do what he did, that future won't happen?" She scrunched her face up she thought about it. "Wait, if you do that, Rin wouldn't be able to summon him, so you *would* have to do what he did..."

Saber looked to Sonic and asked, "Has this ever happened to you?"

Sonic had been staring at the sky during the conversation. At Saber's question, he returned her gaze. "Meeting a jerk version of my future self?" He looked down in thought. "Dunno. Time travel's... wonky. And I've never really thought about changing history. Always just let things be..." He trailed off. "How's Illya? Is she going to be okay?"

"I don't think her life is in danger now, but..." Saber sighed, "We need to get her to Rin, as soon as possible." She graced Sonic with a rare smile. "And you need to get home. We will figure out how to solve our own problems."

" *DON'T THINK THIS IS OVER YET!* "

That eardrums rattling declaration was followed the roar rockets blazing. The view of the sun was blocked as a new shaped entered the sky. It was a machine, one whose like hadn't been seen on this or Sonic's world.

It might have started out as a lunar lander unit. Then, the designer decided to scale the up by three, while turning it upside down. Along

the sides were at least four large cannons, set at the ends of mechanical tentacles. The entire craft was topped off by a dome with giant red scopes for eyes, similar to the Egg-Robos, only with a large fin on the center.

E.G.G * ROBO

*(*Egg Grail Gear)*

" YOU MAY HAVE DESTROYED MY GENESIS RAY , BUT I'M NOT THROUGH ! " Eggman announced over a loudspeaker, **" IF I CAN'T CONQUER THE WORLD INSTANTLY, THEN I'LL DO IT ONE STEP AT A TIME! STARTING WITH... "** One of the mech's cannons swiveled about to point at the heroes. **" YOU! "**

Saber and Shirou felt it. The sheer force coming from the E.G.G Robo wasn't merely the heat of a war machine running. There was a taint of malice mixed with it all, something the Master and Servant only felt once ten years ago...

"Shirou..." Saber began, but she could tell from the look in his eyes, words were not necessary.

Looking grim, Shirou nodded. "The Holy Grail...it's inside of the machine."

But, Shirou swallowed, and weight in his eyes seemed to lighten. Both he and Saber turned. And there was Sonic, holding out the seven Chaos Emeralds in his arms.

"You guys ready?" He asked, and the Emeralds began to float out into the air.

Shirou and Saber watched the jewels with wonder. They could feel the tingles of power as the Emeralds' energy entered their bodies.

Saber said, "Are you sure we can use their power safely? Before, anyone who tapped into the Emeralds suffered..."

"Not as long as you use Power Rings!" Tails cried, and handed something to Saber. "Here, take mine."

Knuckles and Amy likewise gave up their Power Rings to the three.

Knuckles said, "Eggman's using the greatest power in your world, so you should use the greatest power in ours."

"And best of all, you're already magic!" Amy squealed, her eyes shining. "Just imagine what the Chaos Emeralds will let you do!"

Sonic held out his hand, palm-down. With minimal hesitation, Shirou and Saber stacked their hands on top of his.

Shirou thought about the lesson Archer tried to impress on him.
Think about what you need, and let it take form...

As the Emerald spun around the three, the light of the gems began to grow brighter and brighter until they unleashed a shine that was blinding. But only for a moment.

When the light receded, the three heroes stood before all transformed. Sonic, of course, had become a pure white light Hedgehog with his quills now pointing directly up toward the sky. He was once again Super Sonic.

Saber's hair and eye color did not change, but the power flowing through her was expressed in a different way. Her armor and dress, which was once blue and conservative, altered. The dress became shorter, stopping at the knees, and changed to white. The skin of the back and shoulders became exposed. Instead of hiding it, the armor and clothes altogether accented her feminine figure. Rather than tied in a bun, her hair became a ponytail that was allowed to flow freely. She had become a flower that blossomed on the battlefield, Saber Lily.

Shirou once felt the power of a Chaos Emerald explode within him once, but what happened now was far different. Not only was the

unlimited power tempered by the fifty Power Rings, but Shirou knew how to use it. It wasn't enough to merely have power, he had to give it form.

I am the bone of my sword

Steel is my body and fire is my blood

Shirou's left arm began to darken, as if it had been cooked under a tanning lamp for hours...or forged in the fires of war. The rest of his skin followed suit, and his hair turned white as snow...or silver as steel.

I have created over a thousand blades

To better handle the power, Shirou instinctively began to Project new clothing as armor.

Unaware of loss, with an open heart

His jeans were overshadowed by the kind of traditional war pants worn by warriors during days of ancient Japan, tied by a white belt.

Withstood pain to create weapons, reaching for the stars

The darkened arm became covered by a red igote that went up to his shoulder and part of his chest. The fabric had black patterns for decoration.

I have no regrets. It doesn't matter

And hanging by his shoulders like a cape was a kimono. It was white on the outside, but the inside had an image of flowers and grass weaved into the fabric. Channeling the legendary Demon Blacksmith, he had become Muramasa Shirou.

My whole life is Unlimited Blade Works

With their transformations, the three heroes turned to face their distant enemy, who apparently was waiting patiently for them to get started. There was a burst of light, and Super Sonic, Saber Lily, and Shirou took to the air.

Down at Mt. Ryuudou, Rin, Sakura and Bazett could only stare in confusion as what seemed like a giant ball of fog encased the Egg Saucer. They had no idea what was going on. They saw the giant robot Eggman had unleashed from a distance, and heard his bellowing. But after that, a gigantic blur had overtaken the entire aircraft, like a snowglobe in a perpetual shake.

They were so busy trying to figure out what was happening that none of them notice Assassin, lurking just behind the gate, who was also staring at the fog. He was a bit annoyed that he couldn't see the action anymore.

Damn it, he thought, I knew I shouldn't have come down.

As the three Super Heroes charged at the E.G.G Robo, the massive machine responded by firing several bursts of energy from the beam cannons on its shoulders. The heroes split apart to dodge it. Falling back, Shirou fired several Broken Phantasms to counter the beams.

Amid the explosions that shook the air, Saber and Sonic shot forward before splitting apart for a pincer attack. The tentacle-blasters fired off to try and stop the two Supers, but they failed. Sonic easily weaved around the shots, and Saber swatted them aside with her sword.

Meanwhile, Shirou was also on the move, but instead of going at the hull like Sonic and Saber were, he was moving up towards the top where the eyes were. Seeing him coming, the eyes began to glow before firing twin beams at Shirou. Shirou held up both hands and the *Rho Aias* appeared, blocking the beams. Meanwhile, Super Sonic slammed into the hull of E.G.G Robo, causing the machine to

rock. As Sonic bounced off of the mech, Saber took advantage of its disrupted balance to go at one of the E.G.G Robo's arm-cannons. As much as she wanted to use her Noble Phantasm to destroy the mech, she had no idea how devastating the explosive attack would be while amplified by the Chaos Emeralds. It would be too risky to the city below. So instead, she cut through the joint of the tentacle, slicing the cannon clean off. The E.G.G Robo spun about and tried to blast Saber with one of the other cannons. Saber broke away from the Robo to avoid being blasted, while Shirou fired off another broken Phantasm to block the shots. Meanwhile, Super Sonic rammed into the E.G.G Robo's hull again.

" ***Arrgh!*** " Eggman shouted over the speakers, " ***Think you're so smart, huh!? Well, let's see you handle THIS!*** "

The E.G.G Robo began to spin around, releasing dozens of shots at random. the three Supers seperated and flew about and between the scatter-fire. Shirou Projected a duplicate of the *Gae Bolg* , looked for a gap between the blasts, and threw it as hard as he could. It struck the E.G.G Robo, causing the mech to stop.

Taking advantage of the brief lull, the three shot forward to wreak more havoc on the machine. Sonic went into a long spiral as he flew, dodging more blaster fire. Saber and Shirou split apart, circling around to take the E.G.G. Robo from the sides. As they did, missile launchers unfolded from the back and let loose a dozen or so ballistics. The missiles had homing functions, and swerved wildly in the air to catch their targets. Saber and Sonic managed to avoid being blasted with some work, but Shirou wasn't so fortunate. Being unused to flying, his movements in the air were not agile enough to dodge all of the rockets. One missile brushed against him and the explosion sent him flying.

" *Shirou!* " Saber cried out in alarm.

But amazingly, Shirou felt no pain. The force of the impact rocked him, but he didn't feel anything. He recovered quickly enough and resumed his attack.

The E.G.G Robo closed its missile launcher and tried to blast at the three with its cannons, but they managed to avoid the shots. In desperation, the E.G.G Robo rocketed up and away, and flipped over to try and blast them with its lasers.

"Persistent, isn't he?" Sonic shouted as he and Team Saber zigged and zagged.

"Sonic, come here!" Saber shouted.

Super Sonic did as he was told, and once he was close enough, Saber swung up with the flat side of her sword. Sonic was flipped towards the E.G.G Robo, spinning faster than he would have otherwise. The rotations were strong enough to deflect the laserfire. Seeing him coming, the E.G.G Robo rocketed away to avoid being hit. Sonic flew up and past the mech, but high above was Shirou, who had Projected another *Rho Aias*. Sonic bounced off of the shield, and slammed right down onto the E.G.G Robo's back. While Eggman was caught off-guard, Saber flew up to attack one of the other cannons, and sliced it clean off of its tentacle. The E.G.G Robo tried to fire another slew of missiles. In response, Shirou Projected dozens of swords and threw them at the barrage, destroying each missile before they could hit their target. He then followed up by throwing a *Kanshou* to impale on the launcher, with *Bakuya* close behind. The E.G.G Robo tried to fly away from the weapon, but the two swords' magnetic connection brought *Bakuya* into the launcher, destroying it entirely.

As this happened, Saber and Sonic launched a pincer maneuver on the mech. Super Sonic launched a Super Homing Shot from the left, slamming and Spin Dashing into the machinery. As the E.G.G. Robo shook from the impact, Saber Lily came at him from the right, slicing her sword across. Her blade connected, but before she could cut all the way through the machinery to the core, one of the tentacle-cannons aimed and fired at Saber, sending her flying away. Once she recovered, Saber flew back at the cannon. It tried to shoot her again, but Saber swung her sword like a baseball bat, swatting the bolt of energy back at it, causing the weapon to be destroyed.

Satisfied, Saber flew back to collect some Rings to recharge her power.

But as she did, something unexpected happened. The large gash her direct assault on the hull made began to emit a strange sound. And then it began to leak.

And the leak became a flood.

Mud poured out of the E.G.G. Robo, but it didn't rain down below. Instead, it went *up* , and wrapped itself around the mech. It coated the machine, drying out and hardening. It was like a suit of armor. At the top, a line of jagged spikes began to surround the eyes, making it look like the E.G.G. Robo was wearing some sort of twisted crown.

"What's happening?" Shirou asked as he and Sonic regrouped with Saber. They could only watch in shock at the mechanical metamorphosis.

"Avenger...he's starting take control of the machine!" Saber realized, "We have to destroy It!"

"Will that be enough?" Sonic asked, "Even if we take down Avenger here, he's still part of the Holy Grail! He'll just come back in the next War!"

Shirou, staring at his hand, spoke up. "I...I have an idea."

Meanwhile, the eruption of black mud had stabilized, forming a sort of crown and armor around the E.G.G Robo. The cannons were still capable of movement, but the mud was covering the barrels completely. They shouldn't be able to fire anything.

Shouldn't.

Each end of the blocked-up cannons began to glow, and then shattered as cannons went off. The shards transformed into starfish, purple, vile starfish with reptilian eyes in the center. The swarm of

starfish charged at the heroes, forcing the three to separate. While Saber Lily and Super Sonic weaved in between the horde to get through, Shirou hung back and Projected a bow. His arms becoming a blur, Shirou fired a hundred or so Broken Phantasms, striking each starfish and causing them to explode.

Meanwhile, Saber and Sonic had reached the E.G.G Robo. Having lost a bit of his momentum getting around the swarm of abominations, Sonic began to circle around the mech with increasing velocity. Saber found herself dueling with one of the tentacles. The limbs movements were more erratic and less predictable than before, but she was able to block and parry it's attempts to club her away. Once she knocked the cannon off course far enough, Saber took at the opportunity to swing her sword into its joint. The blade cut into the mud and metal, taking the cannon off of the tentacle completely. As the cannon exploded (Because, why not?), Sonic broke out of his high-speed orbit and rimmed himself as hard as he could into the E.G.G Robo's head. The mech shook from the impacts, and then rocketed away from the two heroes, only to be intercepted by Shirou, who had Projected Herakles' stone axe.

" *Nine Lives Blade Works!* " Shirou delivered a series of powerful slices at the E.G.G Robo's body, trying to cut through and carve through the mud that was covering the hull. Although he caused incredible damage to the mud, the E.G.G Robo spun about and knocked Shirou away.

Super Sonic then came speeding towards the mech, and slammed as hard as he could into the chipped point, large cracks to spread out. The machine flipped over from the impact, coincidentally throwing Sonic off of it. With its remaining cannons, the Egg Robo fired a trio of energy bolts at Sonic. Before they could hit, Saber Lily was on a course to intercept. She flew between Sonic and the shots and swatted the energy away from him.

Were those shots wearing helmets? Saber wondered. And it almost looked like they had faces...

Behind Saber, Sonic recovered and began another charge at the EGG Robo. He zigged and zagged around the firepower unleashed, and successfully slammed himself into the crack Shirou caused earlier. As he rebounded off, two starfish were fired by the other cannon and latched onto Sonic. Sonic struggled to push them off, but Saber and Shirou had to come and slice the abominations to pieces.

"Thanks!" Sonic said as he zipped away. Those creatures had drained a bit of his energy, and he needed to replenish his Rings.

Seeing Sonic's movements, the E.G.G. Robo rocketed towards the Hedgehog. Energy poured out of one cannon, taking shape in the form of a giant red spear.

Saber Lily got a bad feeling from that spear. She shouted, "Sonic, look out!" and flew to intercept.

Thanks to Saber's warning, Super Sonic ducked down just as the giant spear was thrust at him. Sonic went into a loop around the spear before kicking off the side and scoring some Rings. Meanwhile, Saber came in from behind to block the spear as the EGG Robo tried to swing about to catch Sonic from behind. Shirou then came down from above with a Projection of Assassin's sword, the *Monohoshi Zao* and cut through the cannon part. Although it was still intact, the cannon was clearly just barely hanging on. Super Sonic circled back and struck the cannon with a Homing Shot, destroying it completely.

With the spear disappearing from the cannon's destruction, Saber Lily broke away and charged at the E.G.G. Robo. The E.G.G. Robo responded to her assault by firing lasers from its eyes, but Saber effortlessly dodged the beams. Once she was close enough, she swung her sword into the mud, striking the exact point Shirou had damaged with Berserker's sword. When her blade connected, there came a bright flash of white light, and noise like a scream, and there was a huge hole in the mud-armor. It began to reform, but slowly than it had first appeared. Saber prepared to strike harder, but the

E.G.G Robo rocketed away before she could. The force of its acceleration blew Saber back, but she was quick to follow. Up above, the E.G.G. Robo pivoted so that it could zap Saber with its eyes. But because its focus was on her, it didn't see Sonic and Shirou fly up from behind. Shirou stabbed the machine with the *Monohoshi Zao* and Sonic rammed down onto the hilt, jamming the sword even further down. The E.G.G. Robo spun around to fend them off, releasing a salvo of laser blasts.

Saber met up to where the boys had been. "Shirou, the mud is vulnerable to holy swords! Can you Project swords like that?"

Shirou thought for a moment. Within that moment, he remembered a vision, of a sword in a stone. "I think so."

In a flash, that sword appeared in Shirou's hand. Saber couldn't believe it. She had once used that sword long, long ago. Before she was granted Excaliber.

"Not bad!" Sonic cheered, "But, can it talk?"

Shirou blinked in confusion. "No...?"

Sonic nodded solemnly. "Even better."

Great, now I'm never going to stop thinking about it, Shirou thought, What kind of journey did you go on? What kind of enemy were you fighting? Why do you need to know if a sword can talk ?

Knowing that there was no time to get an explanation, (and that the answer would never be as fantastic as what his imagination could cook up) Shirou went with Saber and Sonic to face off against the E.G.G. Robo for the last time. With most of its external weapons destroyed, the automated abomination ceased any sort of lucid action. Instead, it began to spin about erratically, firing the lasers from its eyes. And more mud was pouring out, flying out and hardening into spikes.

"We can no longer afford to hold back," Saber determined, "We need to end this in one blow!"

"Then we better make sure this one hits!" Shirou agreed, "Sonic! Get in front! We'll support you!"

Super Sonic floated before Saber Lily and Muramasa Shirou. Curling up, he began to spin rapidly as he went into an airborne Spin Dash. In the back, on the left and the right, Saber and Shirou pulled their swords back, preparing to strike as hard as they could.

" *Ex...* " Saber swung. " *-Caliber!* "

And so did Shirou. " *Caliburn!* "

And Super Sonic shot forward, carried not just by his own power, but the power of both swords. The flashes of energy they unleashed left behind a trail of light, making it look like a shooting star was fast on the approach. Super Sonic burned past the mud, deflected the lasers, and smashed into E.G.G Robo...

...Burrowing all the way down...

Sonic found himself standing in an empty room. Only, it was a room in the loosest of senses. It didn't have floors, walls, or ceilings. In fact, it didn't even have light, but it also didn't have darkness. It was a solid emptiness that defined and encompassed every variation of the term "Void".

It's like someone started to make a Special Zone and gave up. Sonic thought. Cupping his hands over his mouth, he called out, "Helloooooo?"

" Welcome."

Sonic turned around. Precisely two meters away, a figure...a being that was like a solid silhouette...was sitting on the floor. It's left leg

was splayed out, while the right leg was partially propped up. It's left arm was resting on the right knee, and the right arm hung limply by the being's side. That right arm rose to beckon Sonic forward.

" I bid you welcome, and congratulate you for winning the War, Noble Warrior." The Shadow said. It's voice sounded too familiar to be comforting. It sounded too much like Avenger's.

Sonic caught on instantly. "Am I in the Holy Grail?"

The Shadow bobbed its head forward. "You are correct. It is here that you will receive the wish..." It grew a blood red smile. "All you must do is state it."

But Sonic was no longer paying attention to the Shadow. Instead, he had taken off the glove of his right hand, and was examining that hand's back.

On it were Saber's Command Seals.

" The Holy Grail's power can only be used by a Servant," Sonic remarked, looking back with a sly smile. "And a Master can control a Servant with these Command Seals...right, Avenger?"

Avenger's smile twisted into a fierce set of fangs. "You are no Master of mine! "

That sly smile had evolved into a full-on smirk. "Wanna bet?" Sonic asked, putting his glove back on. "You're the only Servant here, and I'm the guy with Command Seals. Let's see whose Absolute Orders are obeyed."

Sonic turned to face Avenger fully. Pointing, the light of the Seal could be seen from within the glove. Light shot from the tip of Sonic's finger as the Command Seal became a sword.

" My first wish-" Sonic began, "-Is for you to give Illya her energy, so she can have the life of a normal human being!"

The sword flew forward and impaled Avenger's left shoulder, knocking the Servant back. Avenger gasped in pain as he struggled to remove the blade. But it would not give.

But Sonic wasn't finished yet. A new sword formed. "My second wish is for Archer to be freed from his contract with the World, and be allowed to pass on!"

The sword struck Avenger's right shoulder. The corrupted Servant let out a howl. "Stop!"

"And my last wish," Sonic said firmly, "Angra Maiyu! You will return to the Throne of Heroes, and never again be summoned by the Holy Grail!"

The third and final sword went directly into Avenger's chest. The Servant fell to his knees. Then, the swords dissolved, becoming dozens of gold rings. The Rings linked together to become chains, and each chain wrapped around Avenger's wrists and neck, pulling him down and into oblivion. But the Shadow struggled to stand, and stalked towards Sonic. The pull of the chains forced him into an almost-crawl. In desperation, Avenger's form began change. It was still an shadowy outline, but the shape looked more like a titanic Warrior with wild hair. However, the chains still held him down.

*"I hate you, Hedgehog," Avenger hissed, its eyes blazing. His form changed again, this time into a woman with hair like angry snakes. "I hate you..." And then the woman was clad in a cloak and hood, "Hate you..." His voice began to rise with each word, until he was basically screaming. And with each word, his form would change again, into a giant, a samurai, and so forth. "Hhhhate...hate... Hate! Hate! Hate! **HATE!**"*

Sonic, who was walking away, stopped and sighed. Turning back, he began to wind up.

*Avenger's fangs rearranged into an open mouth. " **SONIC-!** "*

Sonic's fist made contact with Avenger's head. The Servant's body crumbled away, the pieces fading into oblivion. As they vanished, the world started fill with light and color.

Sonic shook his head. "What a sore loser." He said as everything began to vanish.

On the outside, barely a second passed when Super Sonic smashed into the Holy Egg Grail before he blasted his way out of the other side. The entire mech shook as sparks of electricity danced about. Inside the cockpit, every computer display and console beeped and made noises of alarm. Dr. Eggman rapidly punched in command after command in a futile attempt to regain control or at least shut off the noise. Eventually, almost unwillingly, his eyes took in the words displayed on the screen directly in front of him.

GAME OVER

YOU LOSE

Eggman groaned and slumped in his seat. He then stuck both fingers in his ears and clenched his teeth.

"I *hate* those heroes." The doctor muttered.

The Holy Egg Grail exploded. The blast was both mundane and supernatural in force, and anyone with ears and active Mage Circuits could hear and feel the blast. The Egg Mobile, still attached at part of the cockpit, went flying back at the Egg Saucer, crashing into the part of the building with Eggman's face painted on, knocking out the mouth.

"They did it!" Tails cheered, partially for the benefit of the ones in Fuyuki, but mostly because of his own exuberance.

High in the sky, Super Sonic returned to where Saber Lily and Muramasa Shirou were waiting. He gave the two of them a thumbs up.

"Mission accomplished!" Sonic said.

"And what of the Grail?" Saber asked, "Did you encounter Avenger?"

"He's taken care of," Sonic assured her, "Shirou's plan worked like a charm! Avenger won't be a problem anymore!"

Shirou thought about the manifestation of evil that had grown around Eggman's mech. He wondered if that had been a side-effect of Eggman's experiments to control the Holy Grail...or the natural result of Angra Maiyuu's corruption affecting the machine.

"I don't think we could have pulled this off without you, Sonic," Shirou said, "You coming here saved us all."

"Ah, I'm sure you guys woulda done fine on your own," Sonic replied cheerfully, "You're too hard on yourselves."

Their discussion was cut short when a piece of the Egg Saucers exploded. From their gravity-defying vantage point, the three could see that Eggman's flying fortress had suffered severe damage from the battle. It was unlikely that would remain aloft for much longer.

"Looks we've gotta get going," Sonic decided, and said to Shirou, "Next time, Let's do this at my place!"

"Next time'?" Shirou repeated.

"Sure!" Sonic winked, "The only thing that makes leaving somebody bearable...is knowing you'll meet up with them again."

Shirou and Saber exchanged looks, and then smiled at Sonic.

"Sure," Saber agreed, "Until next time."

Sonic then snapped his fingers. "Oh, right! One thing I forgot..."

Sonic threw something in the air, and flew around to put his arms around Saber and Shirou's shoulders. There was a click, and Sonic zipped back to catch the object before it fell away. He turned around and handed it to Shirou. It was the cell phone he took from Rin.

"Forgot to give this back to Rin," Sonic explained, "Little souvenir for you guys. Precious memories, right?"

Saber smiled warmly. "I don't think I could ever forget any of this. Thank you."

It was the strangest phenomenon Fuyuki had ever witnessed, and after the past week or so, that was saying something. The massive flying saucer that flew in through the city's airspace, only to stop above the local mountain shrine. And then, a mysterious fog appeared around it, covering the entire structure. Only the briefest flashes of light gave any hint of what was occurring within. And then, like that, the fog vanished. And the Egg Saucer which was once a terrible threat to the country, and probably the would, was suddenly a wreck barely able to hold itself up. Only a handful of people in the entire world had even the slightest idea what it was all about.

And one them, a nameless samurai who called himself Sasaki Kojirou, could feel his life running out, even at the temple gate. The Holy War was over, and from the looks of things, the right side had won. With the Holy Grail's presence gone, there was nothing to keep him anchored to the world. He didn't mind. He had seen and done more than he had ever expected to. The last thing he saw, however, was twinkle of light in the distance, drifting away from the Egg Saucer, like a star falling with the speed and grace of a snowflake.

Right outside the training hall of the Emiya Estate, Shirou, Saber, and Illya landed. The tiny girl was being held up at each arm by her brother and his Servant. She looked a bit out of it, as would anyone who had just woken up from a terrible dream would be. Up above,

the three of them watched as the Egg Saucer gave off one last burst of light- shaped like a hedgehog's head.

And then it was gone.

Six months later~

"...And then they were gone," Rin said, taking sip from her tea cup. "The rest of us met up with Shirou, Saber, and Illya later that day. The news media reported that Eggman's airship just vaporized, and after a month of cleanup, the matter was dropped."

Sitting across from her in the Tohsaka Mansion's living room was an English man with long dark hair. He was only a third generation Mage, which should have meant that he'd be doomed to a menial position. But, through virtue of his hard work, intelligence, and maybe blackmail, (nothing could be proven) he had earned the title of Lord, becoming the second man to bear the moniker El-Melloi. Being one of the only Masters to survive the Fourth Holy Grail War, he was something of a living legend among the students, particularly the female ones. And a few males.

Waver Velvet sighed, swirling his drink in the tea cup he held in his hand. On his shirt, the emblem of some video game franchise (Rin didn't know which one) had been printed on. "And I thought *my* War was convoluted. But I still have questions."

"Yes, I thought you would," Rin replied, "It's been half a year, and I'm still trying to figure out what happened."

Waver got up and walked over to the mantle. On it was some sort of odd toy, of a creature with drop-shaped head with a propellor on top. It looked completely out of place in a mage's estate, but for some reason it was clearly given a place of honor. In front of it, there was a little card reading "Do NOT Touch".

Waver asked, "First off, do you know what happened to Bazett? She sent in a letter of resignation months ago, and then went off the radar." He turned back to Rin, awaiting her answer.

Rin shook her head, thinking back to what the Enforcer- ex -Enforcer had said during their last meeting.

" I don't know if you're still Interested in joining the Clock Tower, but if you do, be sure to sign up for the 12 th Modern Magical Theories Department." Bazett said, "The department head, Waver Velvet, will probably be your only ally there. I'm told he's something of a maverick among Mages...he likes video games.

" What about you?" Shirou asked, concerned. "Won't you be able to help Rin?"

But Bazett shook her head. "I'm leaving the Association. There's no way I can return to that lifestyle comfortably. Not after what I've experienced here."

" What are you going to do?" Sakura asked.

Bazett sighed, leaning back and stretching on her pillow. "I have no idea. I guess I'll go back to my family for a bit. And then- who knows? I'll go where the wind takes me."

Rin shook her head in annoyance. "First Shirou, and now you. Sonic's attitude is like a plague. You're just going about doing whatever you feel like."

Bazett smiled sadly. "Actually, I think I'll be following Amy's lead on this one." In her pocket, she could feel the tarot cards Amy used during their time in hiding. Perhaps she could consult them for ideas... "Thank you, though, for the nice compliment."

Rin smirked back.

"She's probably living a free life," Rin suggested, "Which isn't such a bad thing, I'd say."

"That depends on what you do with that freedom," Waver replied, and sat back down. "Which brings us to my question. Why do you want to enroll into Clock Tower?"

Rin didn't answer at first. She took a second sip of her tea. Then, she said, "Originally, I wanted to enroll just to learn more Magecraft, and improve my status as a mage. But after everything I've been through, that now seems immature."

Waver nodded. He had the same sort of epiphany after the Fourth War. He gestured for Rin to continue.

She said, "According to my research, the leylines in Fuyuki have been irreversibly disrupted. Without their normal function, the Holy Grail Wars can never resume in these lands."

"But the ritual still exists. There's nothing to stop another group of mages from starting another Grail War somewhere else. That's why I've decided to join Clock Tower, and sought you out," Rin looked determinedly at Waver. "I want to dismantle the Holy Grail War completely."

Waver sat back down in his chair. He rubbed his chin in thought. "You don't ask for much do you?" He remarked, "My own status won't be enough. You'll have to work your nose to the grindstone, and these fogies won't be keen on letting some rookie from Japan get any sort of prestige to pull that off. But I suppose if you get started now..."

"I'm not enrolling now," Rin interrupted, "Not until I graduate from high school, at least. I was just wondering if I could have something arranged for then?"

Waver raised an eyebrow. "Wait, wait, wait. So, not only are planning on upending one of the most infamous magical systems ever

devised, not *only* do you want to sign up for my department, but you want a *reservation* ?"

"Is that too much to ask?" Rin raised her own eyebrow, her face otherwise blank.

Waver rubbed the bridge between his eyes. He sighed. "I don't do reservations," He said, "But, if there's availability when you come to England, yes, by all means," *I only came to Japan to get a limited edition copy of Admiral Great Tactics under the guise of investigating the Fifth War's events, how did we start talking about student enrollments?* "But is there a reason for your delay?"

"Yes," And at this, Rin began to smile softly. "I need the time to catch up with my sister."

"All right, everyone!" The new captain of the Homurahara Academy Archery Club called, "That's enough for today. We'll see you tomorrow!"

Sakura smiled as the rest of the Archery club members began to help clean up the range and put away the equipment. Leaning up against the wall, she smiled contently as she looked up at the sky.

It was a habit she had developed in the weeks since the "Flying Saucer" incident (As the news called it). Some of her peers and teachers believed it was her way of coping with the sudden death of her grandfather, and disappearance of her brother. That by looking into the sky, she could see their faces in heaven. It was her way of dealing with her grief.

They were wrong. Sakura was having a great time. Not having to put up Shinji and Zouken's torment was a huge change, but one that she learned to love. Some of the others suspected that at the very least, the Matou home life was anything but happy, but didn't want to probe too deeply in case they triggered something. Either way, things were going just fine for once.

Although, every now and then, Sakura could have sworn that she saw her shadowing moving against the light...

But it was probably her imagination. Probably.

It was in an airport in Thailand did Bazett's journey take another sudden turn. Of course, legally speaking, she wasn't Bazett McRemitz at the time. After leaving The Mage's Association, she felt that an alias would probably behoove her. While there was no *official* policy about "sealing" deserters, Bazett did not want to tempt fate. Although her flight was scheduled to take her to the Americas, Bazett did not have a true destination in mind. She was just wandering, looking for a new purpose.

There came an announcement calling her to the front desk. It seemed that she had been bumped onto a different plane leaving from a different gate. Bazett was worried about possibly running into an agent of the Association, or but couldn't sense any magecraft being used on the gate or the plane.

However, she couldn't quite shake the feeling that something was on the way. Even as the flight was well up in the air, she had this strange sense of foreboding.

"Are you all right?"

The person who asked this was a blond man in glasses about Bazett's age, maybe a trifle older. It was hard to tell. He was sitting on the other side of the aisle right across from her.

"Just nerves," Bazett said with complete honesty, "I'm not used to being bumped."

"I understand gates being changed is rather normal." Her new associate remarked.

Bazett's eyes narrowed. "I never said my gate was changed."

She suddenly became aware that all of the other passengers were reaching into their handbags. That included men. Each bag was big enough to hold a pistol.

"I guess I walked into that one," Her new-friend-who-just-might-be-an-enemy said, "Look, before you do anything rash, Ms. McRemitz, please be aware that not only is everyone on this flight armed, but this plane is being monitored by anti-aircraft guns. If anything happens, they may blow us up."

"How do you know my name?" Bazett asked, "And what exactly do you want?"

"We've been trying to catch up with you ever since you and your friend Amy Rose checked out of Dr. Pierceman's clinic. As for me, my name is Agent Stuart, from Special Forces. I was wondering if you would be interested in a job...?"

This must be that government agent Shirou and Rin alluded to, Bazett realized. That would explain why there was no magecraft being used in this ambush. "What exactly would this job entail?"

"We've recently picked up on some suspicious activity in Romania, around Trifas," Stuart explained, "The name..." He paused, squinting at the unfamiliar word. "...Yggdmillennia...keeps popping up."

Yggdmillennial. That was an organization of mages that split apart from the Association. This was getting interesting. Bazett briefly glanced at the Tarot card she had unconsciously taken from her pocket. The Fool, upright.

GAME OVER

"Phooey!" Illya grumbled, throwing her controller down. "The buttons keep sticking!"

"Or, perhaps you are not as skilled as you think you are." Saber responded, pleased as punch.

Saber and Illya had become fixtures of the Emiya household. Illya was now a ward of the Fujimura Group, with Saber as her caretaker, a duty that was something of a full-time job depending on Illya's mood. Thanks to the energy of the Chaos Emeralds, Saber had managed to remain in the world without the Holy Grail's blessing, although she still had to watch her Mana levels. Illya, who still carried Avalon within herself, cast some Magecraft that would allow her to share her own Mana and take some of the burden off Shirou.

"I'm home," Shirou called out as he entered the house.

"Welcome back, Shirou," Saber returned warmly, "How was your job? Illya and I procured the tickets."

"Already?" Shirou raised an eyebrow, "I thought it would take longer to save up that sort of money..."

"Saber got a job of her own," Illya put in, smirking. "As a *maid*."

"I am not a maid!" Saber protested, her cheeks turning red. "It was just...a uniform they had at the restaurant. I didn't want to get the clothes Rin gave me dirty."

It was something Saber and Shirou decided while waiting for Rin, Sakura and Bazett to return. Although there was currently no sign of Avenger tainting the Grail's wishes, they couldn't take any chances. When the school semester ended, the three of them would go to Einzbern Clan in Germany for any information that could stabilize Illya's body. Then, they would go to England, to pay tribute to the nation Saber once ruled.

And then, who knew? The sky was the limit.

Maybe they would find a way to see Sonic again...

It was a clear blue sky above. Around him was a lush, green valley.

He didn't know how he got there. He had vague memories, phantom pains from events long since over with. For a moment, he didn't know what to do.

Then, he remembered; *I have to find her* .

And so, he walked. He didn't know how far, and for how long. His legs seemed to have infinite stamina. Time had no meaning. It could have been for an hour, or perhaps an eternity.

But he found her. There she was, standing at the back of a lake that seemed stretch on into forever. She was facing him, clearly having waited all this time for his arrival. And looking at her, he felt his heart, which had felt so hard and hollow, beat as his blood began to warm. He had experienced so much pain, and so little reward. and yet...

He said, "But I'm glad. And- I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long," and he smiled, like the boy he used to be. "I'm back, Saber."

And she stepped towards him, her smile soft and warm like the morning sun. And she said, "Yes- Welcome back, Shirou."

And they joined, the dream completed. Soon, they were lying together in the grass, staring up at the sky. One of the clouds looked like a hedgehog.

He didn't know why, but he liked that hedgehog.

Higher than the sky, far beyond the stars, through the veil of mystery of space and time, was a different land, a different life. That world was superficially similar to the world before it, but many differences.

And one of those differences was that it had Amy Rose paying a visit to her friends Cream the Rabbit, Cheese the Chao, and Blaze the

Cat. Amy was telling them about her latest adventure, and the world of magic she had lived in for a time.

"So, these warriors, Lancer and Archer, died?" Blaze asked. Besides her, Cream and Cheese's eyes were tearing up.

"Yeah, according to Sonic and Shirou," Amy admitted, "I know they were already dead and stuff, but it's still too bad, especially Lancer. Bazett really loved him."

"Oh, that's so sad!" Cream sniffed, while Cheese began to cry. "Love stories should have happy endings."

"I know," Amy said, "But, at least they were able to beat that evil priest and get back together for a little while. That's better than it would have been otherwise. The Magic Ghosts would have gone back to the afterlife after the War ended, anyway." Amy looked up at the sky. A flock of Flicky birds were flying past the sun. "But, maybe Bazett and Rin will find a way to bring them back, without needing a war. Anything's possible..."

It took Knuckles quite a bit of time to reach Angel Island. A landmass that floated in the sky was not something you could reach by normal means. But Knuckles wasn't a normal guy.

As he approached the shrine of the Master Emerald, Knuckles stopped by a tree, which had an old-fashioned time clock fixed to the trunk. He put his card in the slot and punched in.

"Well! Here you are at last." A sultry voiced called out.

Knuckles looked up. Sitting on top of the Master Emerald was the shapely form of Rouge the Bat. She had her legs crossed as she looked down at Knuckles. He had mixed feelings about that, as he walked up the stairs

"What are you doing here?" Knuckles asked.

"Well, I figured since you were off dealing with Eggman's scheme, there'd be no one here to guard the Master Emerald," Rouge explained, assuming a reclining position. "So, I came here to fill in."

Knuckles rolled his eyes. "Yeah, right! You probably thought you could steal the Master Emerald scott-free," He glanced down at the shrine's base. "Didn't she?"

There was a sound like drop of water hitting a puddle, and a light blue liquid began to pour out of the shrine from the cracks. It began to pull together, taking form, like an over-sized jello mold. The result was something vaguely humanoid, with glowing green eyes, two spikes sticking out of the head, and a brain floating inside.

"Ugh, you've got a funny idea for a guard dog," Rouge grimaced, "Who or what *is* this thing?"

"Chaos is an old friend of the family, kinda," Knuckles said, giving the water creature a fist-bump. "He's been guarding the Master Emerald longer than I have."

Knuckles marched up the steps, and once he was at the top, sat on a pillow that had his name on it. ("KNUX", stitched in cursive) Once he was in a suitable sitting position, he leaned back and took in the view of the island's natural splendor.

Knuckles sighed, "It's good to be home."

In his workshop on the edge of the Mystic Ruins jungle, Tails was hard at work. When they returned from the Servant's world, he was still sad about Archer. Not wanting to be consumed by grief, Tails decided to deal with it the only way he knew how.

Tails was so focused on his current project that he almost didn't hear the doorbell over the soldering gun. Luckily, when he paused to wipe his brow, the tell-tale buzzer drew his attention to the red light above the door.

Tails pushed a button and spoke into the intercom. "Come in!"

The door swung open and Charmy the Bee flew in. The buzz from his wings flapping resonated quite nicely against the metal and glass in the workshop.

"I'm here to return the video game I borrowed, Tails!" Charmy announced, waving the cartridge over his head like a flag. "It was really fun- Hey, whatcha working on? A new gadget?"

"No, just this figurine," Tails replied, inspecting his work. It was just about done. "Could you get me the smaller paint kit, and some brushes? They're in the third shelf from the bottom."

Charmy, being the helpful little bug, gladly did so. As Tails got to work painting the figurine, Charmy buzzed about, watching the progress from the vicinity of the ceiling. He quickly got bored with that and flew down for a closer look, hovering just over Tails' shoulder.

"This guy looks pretty cool," Charmy commented, "I like his long red coat. And those swords are awesome. But why is his hair so messy? Wouldn't it be better if it was combed, or something?"

"Maybe" Tails replied, "But I think he'd prefer the messy look."

Charmy cocked his head. "Who's he supposed to be?"

Tails finished painting and sat back. "A hero."

Somewhere on South Island, was a beach. It was a very quiet beach. It had no lifeguards, there were no snack stands, and the only sign that anyone visited it was an umbrella jammed into the sand, casting shade over a beach lounge. Of course, there was also the remains of a jet airliner that had crashed into the adjacent forest, right along the edge. The main body of the plane was still intact, even though it was slowly being overtaken by the forest's growth.

Sonic sped across the beach and, in the blink of an eye, was at the door.

The interior of the plane held no resemblance to its past life as part of an airline. The seats had been taken out, and made into a glorified man-cave. There were shelves for comic books, an electronic entertainment system, and a hammock for sleeping in.

But deeper into the hideout were relics. Photographs. Trophies from old glories. Sonic walked past the photo of him from years ago, wagging a finger at the camera. And past a second photo, similar to the first, but with Tails included. On one table, there was an old jar labeled "Mushrooms from Angel Island", and a set of pressed feathers "From Flicky Island". On a wall, there was a sheet of paper with a list of arbitrary numbers, titled, "Veg-O-Fortress High Score". Next to that paper, leaning against the wall, was a snowboard that used to be part of a chopper's wing. Sonic passed them all without a second thought. At one point, he put up a framed picture of him, Shirou and Saber, next to one of him and Chip.

Satisfied, Sonic turned and went towards an end table. On it was a cushion with a golden ring, and a book with a sword on the cover. Sonic paused to stroke the ring. It shimmered. He then picked up the book and went outside. Sitting in the recliner, Sonic flipped through the book. He soon stopped, and looked up at the sun.

Sonic said, "Saber's version was better."

END_

Really_

We mean it_

Okay, if you insist_

"...And, after the Egg Saucers crashed into the ocean, I managed to get away by using an inner tube from the indoor pool's supply closet," Shinji finished, gesturing limply at the deflated hoop of rubber next to him. "Now, I'm stuck in this weird world with absolutely nothing. No social status, no bank accounts...and my new mage Circuits went dormant after Emiya punched me!"

Shinji fell back, and shrieked as a hidden spring popped out of the ground under his head, catapulting him forward and face first into the beach. Sputtering, Shinji pulled himself up and looked to his new companions for sympathy. Big the Cat had cast his line halfway through Shinji's ranting, while Foggy had taken to eating whatever mayfly that buzzed close enough to his perch between the Cats ears. Neither gave any impression that they had been listening to anything Shinji had said.

Until Big turned his head to Shinji. Although his expression didn't change, Big inwardly considered telling Shinji that from the sound of his story, his current predicament was no one's fault but his own. But he imagined that Shinji wasn't the kind of person who would understand that.

Finally, Big said, "You're scaring the fishes away." Foggy

Shinji groaned , sat on the beach, and buried his head in his hands. "I hate that Hedgehog."

Memoria

Final Chapter: Memoria

Tiger Dojo: Finale

Taiga: Live, from the Highly Fictional Hot Springs Resort, it's the Final Tiger Dojo! *Ahhh...* this is nice.

Illya: It's always good to relax and treat yourself after a job well done.

Taiga: But our job isn't done yet! There are still some unanswered questions that need to be addressed.

Illya: Oh? What is It?

Taiga: I'm worried about Sakura's Shadow. Avenger's gone, isn't He?

Illya: I think it is more likely that Sakura's magecraft has irreversibly change to mimic Avenger, much like how having *Avalon* for a decade changed Shirou's element to sword. A crossover manga featuring both *Fate/Stay Night* and *Tsukihime* had Sakura use her dark powers to a limited degree. This is essentially that.

Taiga: Thank goodness! And I suppose, if she's got special powers now, that would put her more on Rin's level now.

Illya: That wouldn't be hard to pull off...actually, I suppose it would. But Sakura's not as interested in magecraft, considering her background.

Taiga: Speaking of magecraft, I'm surprised Rin chose to stay in Fuyuki, instead of going to England immediately.

Illya: Originally, Rin's scene with Waver was supposed to take place in Clock Tower itself. While they were talking, Omachao would come in and alert Rin about her next class.

Taiga: Ha! That would have been hilarious! But, why the change?

Illya: Rin's character arc in the story is for Mage values to hold less prominence in her heart. If she were to leave for Clock Tower immediately, that would prove that she's learned nothing. By remaining in Fuyuki and choosing to spend more time with her sister, she shows her growth as a person. Unlike her father, who was so focused on the traditions of mages that he was ignorant of his family's suffering.

Taiga: Were there any other scenes that were changed or cut out?

Illya: I think there was going to be interaction between Rin, Sakura and Caren Ortensia, where Sakura uses her dark power to trip Caren up. It would show that the girls have taken control of their destinies.

Taiga: But instead, we get a scene in the archery club?

Illya: Exactly. Sakura is finally free from the intrigues and darkness of mages. There was no need to see her get involved further. And since the Holy Grail War won't happen in Fuyuki again, the Church won't have any pressing need to assign an overseer. There was also an idea about the Mage's Association sending in a team to capture Sonic, but the author felt that be needless filler.

Taiga: A battle between Sonic and the Mage's Association? That would have been cool! Why was it cut?

Illya: Besides the aforementioned filler? If the conflict with the Association devolved into a fight, Sonic's group would take the lead again. It was decided that Rin and Bazett would use trickery to stave off the problem to foreshadow their

Taiga: Speaking of intrigues, I'm surprised that Bazett chose to join up with Stuart.

Illya: Oh, yeah, that was planned from the start.

Taiga: Whaaaat?

Illya: That's actually why Stuart and his group were introduced; so that at the end of the story, they would be able to offer Bazett a new path once she left the Mage's Association.

Taiga: You mean all that intrigue and secret agent work, just for a job interview!? That's too much preparation! Just how far was this story planned out?!

Illya: The author always had a basic idea prepared. As the story went on, that idea became more and more intricate. Each character had a destination in mind, and the story was written to get them there. The girls have new

Taiga: But what about Shirou? He's the main character of *Fate* !

Illya: The story of *Fate / Stay Night* has always been about Shirou's growth as a hero of justice. In this story, instead of having his dreams squashed and deconstructed by his peers, he finally meets someone who represents the ideal he thinks he wants...and finds that not only is reaching it a lot harder than he thought, but that a hero doesn't have to stand alone. In this way, he won't have to give up on his aspirations, but also won't become buried by them as Archer did.

Taiga: And he has Saber by his side...that's nice.

Illya: And me! And this time, I'm not going to let those other girls get in the way! *Onii-chan* will be mine!

Irisviel: Oh, you're going to have your work cut out for you, Illya.

Illya: M-mama!?

Taiga: *Sh-Shishou!?*

Irisviel: Hi, Zecchan! Thank you so much for taking care of my baby girl, I really appreciate it.

Illya: She hasn't been taking care of me! She's always hitting me over the- (*Splash!*) *Glug!*

Taiga: Hahaha... don't mention it, *shishou*. Are you going to join us?

Irisviel: Certainly. Omachao, could you turn on the jacuzzi function?

Taiga: What do you mean, jacuz- *Eee!*

Illya: Gasp! Why is the water churning like this!?

Irisviel: Ahh, this pressure feels so nice, it's like getting a massage from the springs itself... Isn't technology wonderful?

Taiga: Is that the moral of the story? "Technology is good"?

Irisviel: No, that would be silly. The secret meaning of *Fate / Genesis* is the importance and necessity of adjusting to changes, and new ideas.

Illya: Is that so, mama?

Irisviel: Oh, yes. While it is true that the advance technology Tails and Eggman brought from their world has uses beyond the current level of Magecraft Rin could offer, according to most sources, Sonic's world is about a thousand years more advanced than ours. You could say that their technology is on par to the ancient Magecraft of ours.

Taiga: Wait, wait. I remember seeing Caster outdo a blaster Tails built for their battle.

Irisviel: That's right! It's true that technology can be widely used than magecraft, but that doesn't mean one side is inherently superior

to the other. And remember, neither Eggman or Stuart could truly grasp what was going on or make progress in the War because they didn't comprehend the true nature of the conflict. Until Shinji told him about the Holy Grail, Eggman was just grasping at straws. But, because Eggman chose to just see the Holy Grail as a power source, he lost control when the Grail's corruption took over his final mecha.

Illya: That's right! And the only reason the heroes were able to stop the Genesis Ray was because Archer Projected *Fragarach* for Shirou to fire.

Irisviel: Exactly! And Metal Sonic couldn't copy Saber's *Avalon* at all. Do you understand, Zecchan?

Taiga: I think so...this jacuzzi thing really is fine!

Illya: She wasn't paying attention at all...and this woman teaches her own class?

Irisviel: Well, working in a school requires a lot of hard work...

Taiga: Ahh! Wait! What about when Metal Sonic used Lancer's Noble Phantasm?

Irisviel: Oh, that? That's easy. Lancer's spear *Gae Bolg* allows him to warp causality to strike his targets without fail. Metal Sonic had already copied Chaos Control, another power that manipulates time, in *Sonic Heroes*. Metal was able to adapt Lancer's technique with that.

Illya: Brrr...technology is scary!

Irisviel: Even the jacuzzi?

Illya: Hmmm...actually, now that I've had a chance to get used to it, the jets are kind of nice. Thanks, mama!

Irisviel: One thing I've learned from your father is that neither technology or Magecraft are perfect. Each has its uses depending on the scenario. The secret is to think about which would be more effective at a given time.

Taiga: That's a pretty simple moral.

Irisviel: It was a pretty simple story.

Taiga: ...No, it wasn't.

Illya: Well, it's over now. Unless, are there sequels planned?

Irisviel: Oh, I doubt that. The only way to make a proper sequel would be to involve Servants from one of *Fate* 's sequels, which the author didn't play or have access to read.

Taiga: The author's probably going to take a long break from writing stories in general, so those expecting one shouldn't press their luck.

Illya: But still, thank you so much, our loyal readers, for sticking through with us until the very end! We hope you had a great time, and-

(Beep beep beep)

Omochao: You have five minutes until showtime!

Taiga & Illya: Huh?

Irisviel: Oooh, we're going to be late! Everyone, out of the water and get dressed!

(Scene transitions to a theater. In the audience are various characters from the Fate and Sonic franchise. Irisviel leads Taiga and Illya to a set of empty seats. Emiya Kiritsugu is sitting next to them, conversing with Uncle Chuck. Seeing him, Illya squeals in happiness and glomps her father. Behind them, Waver Velvet is trying to get a video camcorder working, but seems to have no luck.)

Next to him, Sticks the Badger curiously pushes a button the camcorder's side. A flash goes off, blinding Waver, and Sticks ducks under her seat.)

(In the orchestra pit, villains of both franchises are tuning their instruments. Shinji, playing a harp, has somehow gotten his head stuck in the strings. Orbot and Cubot try to carefully pry him out to no avail. Kirei, rolling his eyes, takes Shinji's head and just yanks him loose. Shinji howls in pain. Eggman, taking the conductor's stand, angrily taps his podium to get everyone's attention.)

(The curtain rises, showing Amy Rose, Saber, Rin, Sakura, and Bazett standing on stage. Behind them are Sonic, Shirou, Tails, Archer, and Knuckles. They are all wearing Kamen Rider helmets. Behind them is a mural of a beautiful valley is seen. The orchestra begins to play.)

Song: Geki! Teikoku Kagekidan -Shinshou-

Performed by: Fate Genesis Players

Translation of lyrics provided by Tiffany Nguyen (As in, I copied them directly from her Sakura Wars lyric video)

(As the girls sing, the boys go into a somewhat repetitive dance)

Rin: *Kudakechiru yami ni tsukitaerou yaiba* (Thrust your blade into the scattered darkness)

Saber: *Aku wo yuurusani* (We will never forgive the evil)

Saber: *Ai no yume* (Dreams of love)

Amy & Rin & Sakura & Bazett: *Tagirasete* (Swelling up inside)

Saber: *Ukabitatsu* (Over the scenes)

Amy & Rin & Sakura & Bazett: *Senshi-tachi* (We are soldiers)

Heroines: *Kagayakeru otome* (We're beautiful maidens)

Saber: *Mankai no sakura dakishimeru yasashisa ga atsuku moeageru* (Bearing cherry blossoms in full bloom, how fiercely blaming sympathy)

Saber: *Tomo yo te wo nigiri kono ikusa iza* (Take my hand, my friend, and we-)

Heroines: *Kanchi-susume* (Shall win the battle)

Saber: *Setsunai Teito ni odorideru* (We're leaping out to the heartrending Imperial Capital)

Heroines: *Hashire* (Run)

Saber: *Hashire* (Run)

Heroines: *Kousoku no Teikoku Kagikidan* (Fast as light, Imperial Fighting Troupe!)

Heroines: *Unare shougeki no Teikoku Kagikidan* (Roar on, shocking Imperial Fighting Troupe!)

(Instrumental interlude. An elaborate puppet that looks like the love child of the Hydra and a Rancor is wheeled out onto stage, controlled by Team Chaotix and Lancer who are wearing kuroko outfits. The performers break ranks and run about, trying to 'fight' the 'monster' with swords made of paper mache. At one point, Sonic loses his grip on his paper sword and nails Lancer in the head with it. Lancer has to be held back by Knuckles and Bazett as the others continue to 'slay' the beast. To help operate the puppet, Sakura joins Charmy's side. As the interlude ends, Team Chaotix and Lancer take the monster-puppet boys and girls resume their original positions)

Rin: *Ankoku no yoru wo terashidasu yuuki* (With bravery illuminates the pitch-black night)

Rin: *Sai wa nagarareta* (For the die is cast)

Amy & Rin & Sakura & Bazett: *Inochigake -tomoshibi wo-* (For our lives -our light-)

Amy & Rin & Sakura & Bazett: *Mamorinuku -senshi tachi-* (We keep the fire -we are soldiers)

Heroines: *Utsukushii otome* (We're marvelous maidens)

Amy: *Maiagaru sakura kono mune ni someagate* (Stain your chest with fluttering cherry blossoms)

(As the girls are singing, Lancer comes back on stage weilding a large mallet, which he chases after Sonic with. The guys keep trying to do their dance as Lancer and Sonic run around the stage. Archer sticks out his foot, causing Lancer to trip and fly off the stage. Rin shoots them a dirty look. They resume their positions and continue dancing.)

Amy: *Toki wo koeteiku* (As they traverse time)

Bazett: *Tomo yo te wo nigiri kono ikusa iza* (Take my hand, my friend, and we-)

Heroines: *Kanchi-susume* (Shall win the battle)

Sakura: *Itoshi ashita ni kikari are* (For splendid days to come, let there be light)

(Team Chaotix and Lancer return to stage, now armed with fake swords of their own. Everyone begins to have a mock sword fight, even as the girls continue singing. Sakura, looking royally unhappy with the violent scenario, tries to back away, but ends up tripping over the invisible Espio. Shirou and Archer lock their blades, which end up breaking under the pressure and the two Emiyas crash into each other.)

Heroines: *Hashire* (Run)

Saber: *Hashire* (Run)

Heroines: *Kousoku no Teikoku Kagikidan* (Fast as light, Imperial Fighting Troupe!)

Heroines: *Unare shougeki no Teikoku Kagikidan* (Roar on, shocking Imperial Fighting Troupe!)

(Soon, everyone stops fighting and line up on stage.)

Heroines: *Yume wa yomigaeru Teikoku Kagikidan* (The dreams will be revived, Imperial Fighting Troupe!)

Heroines: *Warera aratanaru Teikoku Kagekidan* (And now, we are the new Imperial Fighting Troupe!)

Performers: Thank you for coming! Goodbye, everyone!

(They bow, and the curtain falls)

END